

Welcome to High School: We Hate You

Rosalind's Classroom Conversations, August 2015



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By Rosalind Wiseman

In the upcoming weeks, welcome banners will be hung on high school walls around the country. A few days later, before the official first day of school, administrators and volunteer students from the senior and junior classes will enthusiastically greet the new ninth grade students. They'll tour them around the school, play name games with them, do some ice-breakers and send them home hopefully a little less nervous for their first year of high school. Some schools will do even more and have the older students organize various events to help the ninth graders navigate their first high school experiences.

These programs have the best of intentions. If a ninth grader is overwhelmed with homework, a difficult teacher or a challenging social problem, familiarity with and support from an older student can help. For many in the school community, the existence of these ninth grade orientation programs confirms that the goal is reached; the new students are welcomed into the community and begin to feel a sense of school spirit and pride.

I think we need to challenge that assumption.

The reality is that these programs often exist in tandem with “under the radar” initiations, sometimes student-led but often adult-tolerated or even condoned, which demean, ridicule or harass the youngest and most vulnerable students. As I have often heard from older students, even those who participate in and lead the official new student orientation programs, “It’s tradition. We have to put them in their place.”

Here are a few common rituals I know that happen in many high schools throughout the country:

- Upperclassmen consistently use a specific derogatory name to refer to any ninth grader. This allows the older students not only to demean them but to show that the student doesn’t need to be recognized as an individual person.
- Songs chanted at ninth graders to ridicule them.
- Things thrown at ninth graders like condiments and milk.
- Yelling at ninth graders in public when they get an unwritten social rule wrong. For example, when ninth graders show up to the fall’s first athletic events like football games and don’t know that they should sit in a specific section (usually in the back) of the bleachers, this gives the upperclassmen the right to scream obscenities at them.

Any time we put students in leadership positions, we cannot assume that they will exercise their authority positively or competently, especially when they don’t

receive training about how bias works with the dynamics of privilege and power and which can undermine a culture of dignity in a school. It takes more than just a one-time lecture about responsibility.

What is required is an ongoing training program by trustworthy adults to specifically practice handling complex yet common situations. Some examples of these include: a ninth grader who becomes romantically involved with one of the other leaders, a white leader who is racially insensitive to the students of color in his or her group and can't see why they are hesitant to ask questions, or an older student who strictly follows rules and can't understand why a younger student is getting in trouble. The legitimacy of new student welcome programs depends on the preparedness of student leaders to handle and advise the actual problems of being a new student, not in the pairing of seniors and ninth graders only to play name games.

This year I will work with several student councils and new student orientation programs. Here are a few questions I've asked my students in past years and their responses.

What are the official traditions that welcome ninth graders?

- Ice cream socials
- 45 minute meetings with a school leader before school starts
- Dances
- Tutorial sessions before first exams

What are the unofficial traditions that don't welcome ninth graders?

- Pep rallies or F*** You Freshmen/Friday—where we can throw things at them and tell them we hate them.
- Freshmen are only allowed to sit in the back of any games. Because they don't know where to sit in the beginning of school, we can yell at them when they sit in the wrong place.

- Benches in the courtyard or sections of a hill or lawn on the school grounds: Freshmen can't sit in x spot. If they do we can tell them to leave and yell at them.

The questions we need to ask these student leaders and the faculty who supervise them are as follows:

- If your program is about being inclusive to new students, should members of this program participate in traditions that exist to “put freshmen in their place?”
- If program leaders think these traditions go against their mandate, should they actively protest or act against them?
- Should they transform the tradition to make it more inclusive?
- What resistance do you anticipate getting from your peers and what is your strategy to help students feel part of the community and to get peers to want to participate?

If it's important to seniors to have a ritual or event that acknowledges their “time spent,” you can ask them what the group can do that addresses this need and still welcomes the ninth grade class? One of the groups I recently worked with is trying to come up with a chant that does both: acknowledges how awesome the seniors are and then leads into welcoming ninth graders with a banner that will read “Welcome Freshmen! Class of 2019!”

But let's go back to that “know your place” phrase because it's pretty common among high school students and this is a larger problem than being rude to ninth graders. In a recent workshop with a student council, I pointed out the bias implications within that sentence, explaining that this statement means more than “Your place is beneath mine. I am better than you and if you don't acknowledge that fact in the way I want you to, face the consequences.” It means if you're a white student in 11th grade and you say that to a Latino ninth grader, you're not only exercising power because you're older but because of your race. If you're a wealthy student, this statement conveys to a poor student that having

money in your school gives you the right to disrespect people who don't. Your privilege may blind you to the fact that this is what you are communicating. Moreover, it directly contributes to a school culture where bullying is more likely to occur, more tolerated and less likely to be reported because the targets believe the people with more power can abuse it without consequence.

One of the challenges with developing better training for student orientation leaders is the older student's resistance to shift away from time-honored traditions. Recently, I went on a retreat to train juniors and seniors for ninth grade orientation. We wrote thoughts on the wall about their school's traditions and about their own experiences as ninth graders. Their comments included, "It happened to us as freshmen...They can take it," or "It's tradition." When we asked them what they could say to counteract these beliefs, they came up with statements like, "We would rather be remembered for starting a good tradition than continuing a bad one."

Students who continue a bad tradition won't be remembered. They will simply blend into the fold of all the other students who maintained that tradition, too. Our students have to want to set themselves apart, and if they want to be remembered, it will come from catalyzing new traditions for the good. As one student said, "Why keep a bad tradition if we can leave a better legacy?"

A school culture is only as good as its ability to question its formal and informal traditions and train anyone in a position of authority to exercise that power ethically. As educators, we are fooling ourselves if we think that merely having welcoming programs offsets the much more powerful messages that are conveyed in more "informal" welcoming programs. It's our responsibility to provide good training to the students who are charged with implementing the programs. More than us, they have the best chance of convincing their peers to take ownership of their school culture for the better so all who come there feel welcome.

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