Dos and Don’ts with Special Diversity Events

As a way to recognize diversity in their school or community, many schools host special events for their students, families and educators, whether these events are in honor of Black History Month, Women's History Month or other significant holidays and local and national events.

While it is important to highlight different groups and issues that have otherwise been excluded, minimized, or marginalized, when poorly planned and implemented, such events can leave students with little to take away from the event, and can potentially reinforce stereotypes, polarize the community and continue to marginalize some groups.

While ADL encourages schools to incorporate issues of diversity throughout the school year as an integral part of the curriculum and school culture, we recognize that special diversity events can be worthy endeavors if the implementation is thoughtful and inclusive, the topics and issues are explored deeply, the discussions are meaningful, and the end goals seek positive change. Indeed, at their best, diversity events add to the goal of creating and sustaining safe and inclusive schools.

To assist those who are interested in hosting a diversity event, below is a list of “dos and don’ts” to help create meaningful events. While this list is not comprehensive, it highlights actions that we either recommend or discourage.

DOS
Connect to Ongoing Efforts
Host this event as a launching point or as part of an ongoing effort to incorporate diversity-related themes in school culture. Match the event’s goals and outcomes with larger school goals (e.g., team building, respect for all).

Get Buy-In
Ensure that school leadership, such as the superintendent, principal, activities director and club advisors, support this event.

Set the Stage Up Front
Develop a clear mission statement, goals and outcomes for what will be achieved at this event. Prepare a list of learning objectives for the event before deciding on presenters, topics and activities.

Define Diversity in a Diverse Way
Define diversity broadly including different aspects of identity, such as race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, ethnicity, residency status, age, socioeconomic status and others.

Input from All
Seek broad community input beyond the planning committee. Ask students, family members and community members from different communities and identity groups what they would like students to understand about their identity group and the issues they face. Consider surveying the school community and community at-large to learn what topics are relevant.

Involve Students
Engage students in all aspects of the event—before, during and afterwards.

Involve Other Schools
Invite other schools to participate in the event, to optimize diverse viewpoints, experiences and ideas.
Involve the Community
Make use of resources in community, such as parents and family members, community leaders, civil rights and human rights experts.

Prepare the Follow-up Up Front
Plan ahead for additional opportunities for students who are motivated and inspired to continue to address these issues after the event. Don't wait to plan until after the event is over.

Screen Presenters
Be thoughtful about the kind of presentation that will take place: screen speakers and presentation themes based on criteria that match with the goals and objectives of the event; connect the event with an overarching mission statement, goals and objectives; strike a balance among the topics and viewpoints.

Know Your Audience
Weigh the demographics of the student body and school community against the possible topics and approaches. If there is only one Muslim student, for example, think carefully how to approach the topic of anti-Muslim bias without marginalizing or causing that student discomfort or harm.

Involve Educators
Expect educators to be full participants in the event. Provide training to and/or expectations of educators prior to the event. Prepare staff to engage in discussions about potentially difficult issues with students.

Talk It Up
Announce and make very explicit what students and educators should expect from the event. Do not allow assumptions and rumors to frame understanding of what they will experience. Parents and guardians should also be informed about the day's activities so that they talk with their children about their experiences.
Be Expansive in Exploring Cultures
Present different groups in contemporary times, not just in the past. Cultural and identity groups do not come and go in history, despite what history books may suggest. They are continually a part of the U.S. fabric and should be acknowledged as equal members of this country.

Time to Talk and Reflect
Allow time for students to discuss these issues during or following the presentations.

School Adults Remain Engaged
If outside presenters or facilitators are responsible for leading a group of students, a teacher, administrator or school personnel should be present and engaged, and help with classroom management when the need arises, to send the message to students that that this is important.

Time for Some Action
Address how students can take what they have learned to better the school community.

Connect with National Efforts
Coordinate effort with those happening on a national level such as Mix-It-Up-Day, Day of Silence, etc.

Call Media or Engage with Social Media
Consider inviting the media to report on this event and encourage students and others to amplify on social media.

Evaluate
Evaluate the program afterwards. Did it meet the goals and accomplish the objectives? What did students discuss that has implications to the school culture?
Make the Change
Bring school issues discussed during the event to decision-makers who can affect change in policies and procedures.

Connect with Academic Achievement
Work with educators to find ways for them to incorporate the learning and discussion points during the event in their classroom curriculum or practice.

DON’TS

Host these events as a one-shot deal, in isolation from the rest of the school culture.

Focus only on the three “Fs” – Festivals, Fashion and Foods. By focusing just on these items, school can risk trivializing the culture’s rich history and people’s experiences, and reinforcing stereotypes that tends to “exoticize” or make excitingly foreign instead of showing the diversity within the culture itself.

Tokenize 1–2 students from one specific group to be in charge of their group’s issues, or assume they’re experts. Avoid homogenizing the group, as there is diversity of experiences, ideas and opinions within one group.

Regard the majority as non-ethnic. Typically, people who are middle-class, white, Christian and/or heterosexual are seen as the “norm,” and are not seen as having cultures, traditions or experiences to share. It is just as important for students to understand that they all have a culture and to allow all students to share their cultures, as well as to explore the issues that majority students face, particularly related to power and privilege.

Have only adults as presenters. Engage students or young people from local community organization’s speakers’ bureaus to lead sessions.
Pick “safe” topics. Delve into broad range of topics that challenge students and engage their critical and analytical thinking skills.

Half-heartedly implement the program. Doing so sends a message to students that these topics are irrelevant and unimportant, which does little to encourage them to address injustice and inequity.

Celebrate without addressing or considering deep-seated, real problems that students currently face. To ignore or avoid racism, sexism, heterosexism and other forms of discrimination is to pretend that they don’t exist, which contradicts many students’ experiences. Help them make sense of experiences that stem from bias and find ways to build their resiliency as well as their capacity to act as allies for others who are targeted based on their identity.

Neglect student follow-up. Avoid hosting an event without an opportunity for students to feel empowered and encouraged to do something about it.

BE CAUTIOUS WHEN:

Referring to events as “international,” particularly if highlighting Latinx and Asian American people. It is important to recognize that these ethnic and racial groups have deep roots in the United States and are not all recent immigrants.

Doing simulations. Consider age-appropriateness and readiness, preparation of students and their families in the experience they will engage in, and involvement of the faculty and administration. ADL discourages use of high-risk simulations or simulations that involve large-scale acts of bias or oppression. To learn more, read Why Simulation Activities Should Not Be Used.