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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 and educators, whether they are in honor of Black History Month, Women's History Month and other significant holidays and local and national events.

While it is important to bring to light diverse groups and issues that have otherwise been excluded or minimized, 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 and their issues.

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, ADL has provided a list of “dos and don'ts” to help create meaningful events. While this list is not comprehensive, it highlights actions that we recommended or discouraged.

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 of what will be achieved at this event. Prepare a list of instructional objectives for the event before deciding on presenters, topics and activities.

- ▶ **Define Diversity in a Diverse Way**
Define diversity beyond race – include other identities, such as gender, religion, sexual orientation, abilities, ethnicity, national origin, age and socioeconomic status.
- ▶ **Input from All**
Ask for broader community input beyond the planning committee. Ask students, family members and community members from different 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 addressing 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 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 Islamophobia without marginalizing or frightening that student.
- ▶ **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, such as Native Americans, in contemporary times, not just in the past. 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 presently.

▶ **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.

▶ **Call Media**

Consider inviting the media to report on this event.

▶ **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 challenging 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 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 youth 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, homophobia 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 discrimination and find ways to build their resiliency as well as their capacity to become allies for others who are targeted because of 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:

1. **Referring to events as “international,”** particularly if highlighting Latinos and Asian Americans. It is important to recognize that these ethnic and racial groups have deep roots in the United States and are not all recent immigrants.
2. **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 unless teachers conducting it are highly trained and have the permission and trust from students and their families, and the administration.