Safe and Inclusive Schools for All

All young people deserve the opportunity to thrive in school— academically, socially and emotionally.
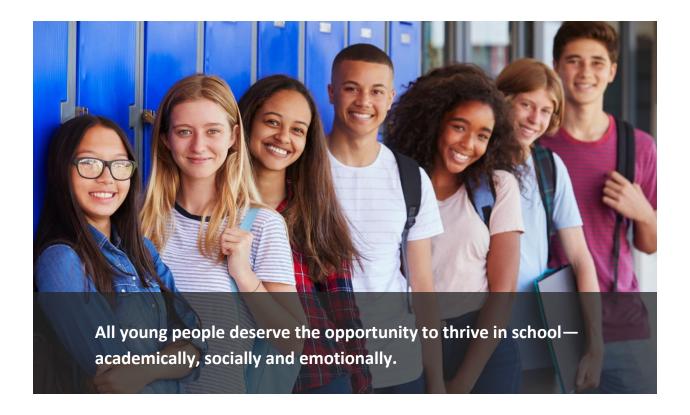
Name-calling, bullying, harassment and bias often get in the way and leave students feeling marginalized in school. When certain identity groups are not represented in the curriculum and visual displays around school, this further contributes to negative academic and emotional outcomes. These biases can be minimized and prevented by challenging them directly as they occur. More importantly, schools should strive to prevent bias and identity-based bullying. They can proactively teach about different kinds of people and build empathy and understanding through books, stories, images, history and role models.

In order to have safe, respectful and inclusive learning environments, schools need to consider true representation and active efforts to teach students about bias and discrimination.

WHAT does it mean to have inclusive, safe, respectful and equitable schools?

Schools have varying degrees of diversity in their student/family populations. In order to provide safe, inclusive and respectful learning environments, schools must prioritize being inclusive and representative of all voices and on many levels—from policies to curriculum to school climate. In

order to prepare students to live in a pluralistic society, which should be a goal for every school, schools should strive towards a high degree of representation so that students learn about, understand and accept different kinds of people.

For example, in the early grades when family is central to the curriculum, children's literature should include stories about a variety of kinds of families including those with same-sex parents and other family configurations. When religion is discussed in World History, all religions should be addressed, whether those religions are represented in your school or not. Including people of color in all subject areas and not just during Black History Month and similarly themed months is critical. Further, educators should actively teach about bias and how people have overcome it, historically, currently and in school communities.

WHO are we talking about when we say inclusive?

Everyone.

Schools should be places where students learn about different people, identities and cultures. This includes identities of people that inhabit your school and those who do not. School personnel may need to stretch themselves to consider groups not typically represented in the books on the shelves, the images on the bulletin boards and the history told in the textbooks. Further, it's important that educators pay particular attention to groups of people who are often marginalized, and then bring their perspective and stories to light.

When we say inclusive, we are talking about people with disabilities, both visible and invisible; LGBTQ people including those who are perceived to be LGBTQ and students' family members; religions that are not the majority including Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and others; people of color including African-Americans, Latinos, Native Americans and Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders; immigrants and those who are undocumented; transgender and gender non-conforming people; women and men; people of different ages and sizes.

WHY is it important?

Bullying and cyberbullying are issues of concern in schools. Identity-based bullying, harassment and assault target students on the basis of their identity (e.g., race, religion, appearance, gender, gender identity/expression, sexual orientation, disability, etc.) and negatively impact school culture. Students who are bullied and harassed are more likely to skip class, miss school altogether, avoid school activities and get in physical fights. Both targets and aggressors of bullying/cyberbullying have higher incidences of alcohol abuse, depression and anxiety. Students—especially those in middle and high school—are often targeted based on an aspect of their identity. Therefore, acknowledging and teaching about various aspects of identify is a key element to prevent this behavior.

For example, a disturbing number of LGBTQ students find school to be a hostile environment; the overwhelming majority regularly hear anti-LGBTQ language and experience victimization and discrimination at school. On the flip side, LGBTQ students who have LGBTQ-related school

resources (e.g. a GSA or visibly supportive staff members) report better school experiences and academic success. In states with laws that prohibit the positive portrayal of LGBTQ people in schools, LGBTQ students face more frequent homophobic remarks, more anti-LGBTQ targeting and victimization and lower rates of acceptance from other students.

Providing an inclusive learning environment benefits all students, not just those who are marginalized. As our society becomes increasingly more diverse, schools must prepare all students to understand one another and learn how to work and live together. It is a life skill for all. Therefore, it is important to go beyond just focusing on preventing harassment and bullying. It is important that schools make the extra effort to highlight and uplift all members of our society.

HOW do we do it?

There are a variety of levels upon which we can promote safe and inclusive schools and classrooms—curriculum, school policies and procedures, how bias is addressed, role modeling by adults, values expressed by the school administration and the physical building. These all contribute to a school climate that lets students know everyone should feel safe, included and respected. Here are a few suggestions:

Policy: In addition to school policies, procedures and codes of conduct about bullying/cyberbullying and harassment, schools should state in their policies that it is a priority for students to feel safe (physically and emotionally) and welcomed. The policy should also have language about inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogy that includes race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, age, etc. Families or community members may be resistant to include certain groups of people, so having a strong and clear policy and holding true to it is important.

[Note: You may get resistance from parents, family or community members who have religious beliefs that impede their acceptance of LGBTQ people. It is not the school's role to disagree with those families; everyone is entitled to their beliefs based on their religion. However, it is important to state clearly that the school strives to maintain a safe, respectful and inclusive environment for all children and that includes LGBTQ students and families.]

Curriculum: Providing both "mirrors" (self-reflection) and "windows" (understanding others) for students at all ages is critical to their education. This means that curriculum materials, including textbooks, literature, media, images, role models and historical periods and figures, should reflect diversity so students both see themselves in the curriculum and learn about others. This will look different for different ages, but it should be clear that representation of many kinds of people is central to the curriculum.

Address Identity and Bias: It is important to address bias when it comes up in small and large ways. You don't need to wait for a school-based incident of hate or bias to address the topic with students. It should be an ongoing topic of classroom conversation in terms of interpersonal relationships, current events, school incidents and the history of people's struggles around the world for equity and justice.

School Climate: From the images in the hallways to the common language that is used by school staff (from the principal to the school resource officer), be public and purposeful about sharing these values with your community. Students, teachers, parents and staff need to see visible signs of a safe, respectful and inclusive school space. Some "public" ways you can do this include: a clear sign in the entrance of the school; murals or wall hangings inside and/or outside; a letter to parents and the community; an updated mission statement; social media posts; regular announcements on the public address system and school-wide events. This helps to consistently convey messages of safety, respect and inclusivity.