

## **Strategies and Resources to Get the School Year Off to a Good Start**

Start the year with an escalation of kindness. It's simple, doesn't require a budget and can begin immediately. Obvious but essential actions, including an emphasis on acts of kindness can help get the new school year off to a good start.

Be intentional in efforts to escalate kindness and improve school climate. The more people practice acts of kindness, the more likely they are to recognize and act in situations in which others are in need. Acts of kindness help students develop compassion and empathy.

### **Teach Kindness**

How do you teach kindness?

- As an adult, model kind behavior in your interactions with other adults and with students. The way adults behave influences student behavior. Calm, caring and consistent encouragement and high expectations provide a predictable environment for all students.
- Ask students kindness and empathy questions in class. All teachers can incorporate kindness and empathy questions into their classes related to the subject they're teaching. For example, if the class is on public speaking or history, ask students "How do you think Martin Luther King Jr. felt when he was giving the "I Have a Dream" speech on the stairs of the Lincoln Memorial? Do you think his stomach felt sick? Do you think he felt nervous?" In English class, you could ask "What would have happened if Captain Ahab was kind to the white whale?" (Kindness and empathy questions help students better relate to other people's situations and feelings.)
- Ask kindness/empathy questions when someone has been mean to someone else. "How do you think X felt when he was called that name?"
- Find more resources and activities for teaching kindness, empathy and creating positive learning environments at [MindUp](#) and at [Mindful Schools](#).

When people practice acts of kindness and gratitude, dopamine – the feel good hormone – is released in their brains. Not only do people feel more positive when dopamine is released, but it also helps with focus and memory.

## **Identify Challenges to Your School's Climate**

Identify what challenges there are to your school's climate and determine how to best address those challenges. Events that have happened and issues that arose during the summer may have had and continue to have a traumatic impact on some people or everyone in the school, including: leaders, teachers, staff members, students and parents.

Some students will come to school with extra stress and even fear as a result of traumatic events. Some students may have a personal connection to events and some students may have experienced or witnessed harassment, bullying and discrimination based on race, color, religion, national origin, sex, sexual orientation or gender identity. Other students may come to school stressed because of fighting at home or because their socks are wet from walking through snow without boots.

Ensure that staff can recognize students who might need extra help because stress or trauma. Make sure staff members are aware of resources or training opportunities on trauma-informed practices. Look for resources for help in the community. Encourage staff members to form partnerships with outside agencies and organizations to help.

## **Current Events/Issues Provide Opportunity**

Current events and societal issues can provide a rich opportunity for education, but if school administrators, teachers and school support staff are not guiding the conversations, such discussions and the ways in which people express opinions can also devolve into hurtful bullying or, in some cases, harassment.

## **Strategies to Begin New School Year for Adults**

Adults set the tone for the school climate. To create a positive and welcoming environment, take the following steps:

- Smile and greet staff and students by name.
- Get to know people and build relationships with them. The more we know a person, the more we understand them and empathize with them.
- Do administrator walkthroughs to connect with students and staff. Students like to see the leaders and the principals outside of their offices.
- Prior to the first day of school, ask all staff members to join you in emphasizing kindness.
- Model the behavior expectations you have for students.

## **Give Adults Time to Talk**

Adults need time to get to know one another and to build community. To do this:

- Take time to get to know each other on a personal level.
- Establish common courtesies for talking with each other.
- Take time to talk about your values before you talk about your opinions.

- Take time to discuss how you will take care of yourself in a good way this school year. This could include: getting plenty of rest, water and exercise; eating a healthy diet; spending time with friends and family and laughing.
- Talk about how you will discuss societal issues and current events. All teachers and support staff will need to know how to do this because discussions will arise in classes regardless of the subject being taught. Discussions will also take place in school settings outside of the classroom.
- School staff can share tips with each other on how to guide discussions.

## **Engage Students and Give Them Time to Talk**

Students are in the best position to help create healthy, caring school climates if they are engaged and empowered to do so. In order to grow the muscles of resiliency, students need to practice responding to difficulties and challenges. Look to the already existing student leadership groups for assistance in setting up discussions with the student body. Just like the adults, students need time to get to know one another and build community. To do this:

- Help students establish and agree on common courtesies and expectations for their discussions about current events and issues inside and outside of class and online and in social media.
- Allow time for students to talk about their values before they talk about their opinions or feelings.
- Model and encourage affective statements.
- Allow regular, consistent time to get to know each other.
- Allow time to discuss how students can be kind to each other in this school year.

Be intentional about choosing a format for the discussion or class. Using the circle process is one effective approach that many schools use as part of Restorative Practices work. A circle gives each person the opportunity to speak as well as listen to others in a respectful, equal, safe and supportive atmosphere. The School Safety Technical Assistance Center has resources on [Restorative Practices](#) and links to [videos on the circle process](#). [Living Justice Press](#) also has several resources about circles.

Many educators are weaving opportunities for discussion into their school day, whether it is in classes or school assemblies. Consider altering the back-to-school schedule to allow time for these suggested activities, designed to establish agreements for discussion and learning throughout the school year.

## **Teach Students Skills for Discussions**

It is important for teachers and school staff to make time with students in class for constructive discussions about current events and issues. Such discussions can improve school climate and help prevent bullying and harassment. Equip students with the tools they need for discussions by teaching:

- Ways to respectfully communicate with one another.
- Conflict resolution. Conflict Resolution Education resources are available to educators.
- Many Restorative Practices programs also teach mediation or provide trained mediators to schools. Find teachers/mediators in the Restorative Practices in Schools Program Directory.
- Basic rules of debate.
- Peer mediation or peer mentoring.
- How to use the circle process for discussions. Circles provide everyone with the opportunity to speak.

## **Review What You Have**

Policies and practices in place in your school district and school often already provide the foundation for building a good climate and improving the school climate.

To support a strong, caring environment at the beginning of this new school year, review:

- Bullying prevention and intervention policies and practices and ensure all staff are aware of district policy and are trained in how to identify, intervene and report. Use the [School Safety Technical Assistance Center's ready-to-go resources and videos](#) for staff training.
- Restorative community-building practices.
- Trauma-informed practices. Ensure all staff members are aware of resources or training opportunities to help them identify students who need extra help. The American Psychological Association has several resources to assist educators such as “How to Talk to Children about Difficult News and Tragedies.”

## **Other Resources for Educators**

[Teaching Tolerance](#) offers several resources for schools and teachers including the [Speak Up at School Guide](#) that offers tools and strategies to speak up against prejudice, bias and stereotypes at school. Teaching Tolerance also offers [Civil Discourse in the Classroom](#) and [Ground Rules for Discussion](#).