Not in Our School
A Student to-Student Campaign to Create a Safe and Inclusive School Day for All

By Mark Katz, PhD

“In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends.”
—Martin Luther King, Jr.

THEY KNOW IT’S WRONG. They want it to stop. But they don’t know what they can do. They’re students at school who witness a fellow student being tormented mercilessly by a more powerful classmate. Not in Our School can help.

Through its many resources and activities, NIOS helps transform well-meaning, but reluctant, bystanders into active “upstanders.” Signing on to the campaign is easy. Their Quick Start Guide outlines ten steps schools can take to begin the process. NIOS campaigns are designed to be flexible so that schools can tailor their efforts to the issues they feel are most pressing. Some schools focus on ways to prevent bullying, some on ways to reduce stigma, and others on embracing differences. Some choose to focus on all of these issues.

NIOS campaigns have five core principles:

● Students take the lead in identifying issues, solving problems, and creating a welcoming environment at their schools.
● To create a safe climate, schools need to address bullying and all forms of intolerance.
● All students can learn to be upstanders who speak up and stand up for themselves and others.
● Create an identity safe school climate.
● Get the whole community involved in creating an empathetic and bully-free environment.

The NIOS website (niot.org/nios) shares inspiring stories with examples from the many schools that are involved. Visitors can watch short videos of NIOS campaigns around the country to get a better sense of the different ways that students are teaming with their peers to create safe and inclusive school environments for everyone. Each video has an accompanying lesson plan with pre-viewing and post-viewing discussion questions and extension activities that are aligned with the Common Core State Standards.

Students at one school, for example, pass out maps of the campus to classmates, and then ask them to circle where bullying is occurring on campus. Upstanders can now keep a watchful eye on these hot spots to ensure fellow students are safe. Another school studies ways to eliminate negative stereotypes. Students participate in a “dissolving stereotypes” activity. Students begin the activity by speaking openly about how negative stereotypes affect them. Then they write them on rice paper and place the paper in a pool of water. All the students watch as negative stereotypes dissolve and disappear.

Creating identity safe climates
NIOS activities focus on creating “identity safe” climates. These are social climates where students from all religious and ethnic groups, gender identities, and backgrounds, feel they belong. Identity safe climates are particularly important to students whose learning, attentional, or other challenges are sources of embarrassment or ridicule. NIOS director Becki Cohn-Vargas says school should be a place where a student learns to see his or her identity as an asset, not a liability.
Identity safe practices also serve as an antidote to “stereotype threat.” Stereotype threat refers to how negative stereotypes affect performance, including performance on challenging tasks at school. Research shows that when abilities are associated with negative stereotypes, it can impede performance on tasks where these abilities are on display. We worry about how others are perceiving us, which, in turn, affects our performance, which now may confirm our worst fear—that the negative stereotypes are true. Identity safe practices can serve to counteract stereotype threat.

Validating differences
Cohn-Vargas says that differences should not be denied or ignored. Rather, they should be shared and acknowledged. Even young school-age children are aware of differences, she says. They know which of their classmates is in the low reading group, or is unable to keep up with the class, or is having a hard time sitting still. And they form judgments about these classmates. These classmates, in turn, can begin to form judgments about themselves.

Some teachers choose to ignore differences, in hopes of preventing negative stereotypes. They might be thinking that by being “colorblind” or ignoring differences, that they are treating everyone the same. As well-intentioned as this may be, says Cohn-Vargas, denying differences can actually
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make matters worse. The key lies in validating differences and finding and celebrating strengths and backgrounds of each student. All of them need to feel equal status in the classroom and that they have something to contribute.

Ending bullying, bigotry, and hate
NIOS grew out of a larger, community-wide initiative known as Not in Our Town (NIOT), a movement dedicated to fighting all forms of intolerance whether it is related to religion, race, gender, or disability. The movement began soon after the broadcast of a PBS documentary by the same name that showed how citizens in the town of Billings, Montana, stood together in the early 1990s to fight against a rising tide of hate crimes.

The documentary and the movement that followed serve to illustrate the transforming role that bystander behavior can play in creating safe and inclusive communities. And bystander behavior, it turns out, can play the same role in creating safe and inclusive schools. Often what’s lacking are tools, resources and activities showing bystanders how to become upstanders. NIOS can help. More information about NIOS is available on their website (niot/nios).

For a more in-depth discussion, see Identity Safe Classrooms: Places to Belong and Learn (Corwin, 2013), the book Cohn-Vargas recently coauthored with Dorothy Steele, [former] executive director of the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity at Stanford University. Steele and Cohn-Vargas highlight key components of an identity safe classroom. Recommendations are drawn from the Stanford Integrated School Project, which conducted research in eighty-four diverse elementary schools. Results showed that when identity safe teaching practices were implemented in the classroom, students not only liked school more, they also scored higher on state-mandated tests.

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