



Leadership Development

Anywhere, Anytime

Practical Tips for School Leaders – #19

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Helping All Students Find Their Voice

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Why is it important for us to help students develop the ability to speak up for themselves and others in not threatening and productive ways? When I was a principal in Michigan, I was facilitating a community forum on diversity and the achievement gap. There were many angry people, including students, present at the forum. The goal was to assure that everyone's voice was respectfully heard. We came together to solve problems of inequity. Some families felt their students were being picked on, bullied and denied access to certain opportunities. Several participants raised their voices and made comments that were vicious. Looking back now I wonder if they were expressing lifelong frustrations of being put down, not accepted and targeted? The evening ended with an action plan for moving forward which involved community leaders regularly speaking to students, a student representative on the city council and to the school board, and lessons in classes to help students engage in 'civil discourse' with each other on crucial topics. We organized and provided forums for students to express their deep feelings without criticism. Our urgency was to provide students a voice and assist them in designing solutions to issues of discrimination.

I was the Principal at East Lansing High School (ELHS) on September 11, 2001 where the student body is very diverse and includes students from many ethnicities and nationalities. Students spoke 53 different languages and dialects. The students from the middle east were a particularly vulnerable group during that year. I remember turning my office into an area for prayer for several young men on Friday afternoon at 1:00. Later that year I approved an Islamic Club to join the roster of other clubs and groups providing students from different perspectives, cultures or proclivities to meet together with the vision of learning from and supporting each other. These clubs were open to any student as they welcomed classmates with differing opinions and beliefs.

Fast forward to the late 2000's when our school was targeted by the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC), a church defined by hate, as a place to attempt to incite a riot of young people. A delegation from the church had been invited to speak to a group of students at Michigan State University. To make their trip worthwhile, they looked for a high school in the vicinity that practiced the worth of all people regardless of differing cultures, languages, economic, political and social proclivities to taunt and demonstrate against. (If you research their tactics you will find in communities where they are successful in inciting demonstrations the church then sues for damages.)

The 1200 students at ELHS made headline news when they refused to be riled by the hateful remarks from the WBC delegation. As a school community we educated the students on the reasons they had been targeted and helped them understand the appropriate reaction to the hateful comments they would hear that afternoon when school dismissed. We organized our students for a peaceful exit from school that day.

I would not like to relive that day or the few weeks that led up to the afternoon. It was very stressful for all of us as we listened to students ask why they were the target. The WBC sent letters to families telling them the values we practiced and taught in our community were wrong. At school we educated our students on how to respond. There were many onlookers waiting for the last bell of the day. I was proud to know that the teachers, staff and community had come together to help our students show who they were in non-violent and peaceful ways.

Teachers and school personnel escorted our students to cars, buses and off property. Together we watched the last member of the church group leave the area we had cordoned off for them. I learned so much that day on the power of helping young people know the right way to express themselves, take care of each other and not be derailed by negativity.

How do we teach children not to hate? How do we help students understand there are methods for tackling the inhumanity of humankind and that there are ways to express frustration without the use of violence? How do we help students understand that perceived power of race, position, economic standing, etc. does not give anyone the right to treat another person disrespectfully or violently?

In the Los Angeles Times yesterday Kareem Abdul-Jabbar wrote a piece on the protests taking place across the country. I encourage you to read his words as he discusses, "[Don't understand the protests? What you're seeing is people pushed to the edge.](#)" He says we are seeing the actions of people who have no voice. They are frustrated and helpless to change the actions of a few who destroy the lives of others. During Dr. King's time protests were organized. Everyone went in the same direction, as a solidified mass. "If it was non-violent, they knew to be non-violent, but this is muddled. More leadership would be very welcome so these incredible mass demonstrations can't be used by people for other means. We can limit the bad, but only if things are organized better."

We have the opportunity to help students find their voice in organized ways to change the course of suffering and violence brought on by the unjust actions of a few. Is it so difficult to listen understand, and be kind to each other?

"No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

Nelson Mandela