



TeachableMoment Classroom Lessons

Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility

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COUNTERING ANTI-MUSLIM & ANTI-ARAB BIAS IN OUR SCHOOLS

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Area: Social & Emotional Learning

Grade Level: High School

Topic: Diversity

Handling Difficult Issues

Race & Racism

Teaching Strategies

Description:

The [American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee](#) [2] has reported an increase in attacks and discrimination targeting Arab and Muslim Americans following the bombing in Boston.” Here are some guidelines aimed at helping to make our schools safe and supportive environments for youngsters with these backgrounds; and to prevent and counter expressions of bias against these groups in any school.

As educators, it's our responsibility to act boldly and courageously to ensure that our schools are safe places, physically and psychologically, for all of our children. Ever since 9/11, one group of students - those with Arab, South Asian, and Muslim backgrounds - have been in special need of a sense of safety at school.

The [American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee](#) [2] has reported “an increase in attacks and discrimination targeting Arab and Muslim Americans following the bombing in Boston.”

Below are guidelines first developed in the wake of 9/11 that continue to be useful in making sure that students who are Muslim, Arab American or South Asian do not become targets of bias and misunderstanding. The suggestions address two related and immediate challenges: to make our schools safe and supportive environments for youngsters with these backgrounds; and to prevent and counter expressions of bias against these groups in any school.

STOP OPPRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

Oppressive behavior can take many forms, ranging from hurtful remarks made in ignorance to insults, threats, and physical violence. The appropriate adult response depends on the behavior and its intent. Below are some things to keep in mind:

- **Don't let offensive behavior go by.** No one deserves to be insulted, threatened or mistreated for any reason, including his ethnic or cultural background, religion, or beliefs. As discussed above, Arab American, Muslim, and South Asian American youngsters may feel especially vulnerable at this time.
- **Interrupt inappropriate behavior in a positive, matter-of-fact way.** If you make a big deal out of a minor incident, you may further embarrass the targeted student and induce guilt and defensiveness in the student responsible for the offending behavior. Neither of those outcomes will be helpful long-term. Normal school policies and practices (for example, rules against put-downs or fighting) apply to most of the situations that will arise, and should be invoked as appropriate. Whenever possible, try to give the impression that you are going about business as usual.
- **See the incident as a teaching opportunity.** Your first responsibility is to protect the targeted student by stopping the behavior or supporting the student in standing up for herself. Your second task, equally important, is to educate the student who made the offending remark or action (and any other classmates who might have observed the interchange).
- **No shame, no blame.** We all have misinformation and uninformed attitudes about people from other cultural backgrounds. None of us were born with these attitudes. We've learned them from growing up in our society. It isn't our fault that we have these biases. But it's our responsibility to educate ourselves and others so that our views correspond as closely as possible to reality.
- **Maintain a positive and non-judgmental tone.** A student who has made an offending remark will be most likely to learn from your intervention and change his or her behavior in the future if you don't appear overly serious or agitated.
- **Use strategies to reduce defensiveness.** If it seems appropriate to have a discussion with a student who has made an offensive remark, try to have the talk at a time and in a setting where the student will feel most comfortable. For example, a one-on-one chat in a private setting at a later time may be more productive than a confrontation in the heat of the moment where the student may feel the need to save face in front of his peers.
- **Listen actively.** To help a student who is acting inappropriately toward other students because of their background, you need to establish rapport with the student and find out where he or she is coming from. To do this, you need to open up communication. This may involve acknowledging the student's feelings ("I can see you're angry"); asking the student to share more ("Please tell me more about what you're feeling"); probing gently ("Why are you angry at your classmate _____?") If the student is willing to open up and give you insight into what motivated the behavior, you'll be in a better position to give her a hand and ensure that the behavior doesn't occur again in the future.
- **Be firm in asserting that students must treat each other with respect.** By listening actively, you will communicate that you care about the student and his feelings. You will understand better why the student acted as he did. But understanding where someone is coming from doesn't mean you accept the behavior.
- **Recognize your own need for support.** Feelings will come up in your students and in yourself. Feelings go with the territory when you deal with issues of diversity. In the wake of traumatic events, we all need extra emotional support from family, friends, and colleagues, we'll be better able to deal well with children's feelings—and with the misbehavior that may sometimes be related to them.
- **Don't be paralyzed by fear of making mistakes.** In working on issues of diversity and developing relationships with people whose backgrounds are different from our own, we will

developing relationships with people whose backgrounds are different from our own, we will inevitably make errors. We'll say things that we wish we could retract. But most people are eager to look beyond our mistakes and give us the benefit of the doubt if our interest in them is genuine and our minds and hearts are open to understanding another culture.

- **Share experiences with colleagues.** Don't work in isolation. The work is too challenging to go it alone. Let your colleagues know about what's happening in your classroom. Share your feelings. Brainstorm effective solutions to problems.
 - **Educate yourself** about the underlying issues raised by the latest news.
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PREVENT HARASSMENT

1. Convene a meeting to engage staff in addressing the issue

At a meeting of all adults in a school (or after-school program), the principal or program director should make a strong statement that innocent people must not be blamed for the acts of others and that it's the responsibility of all adults in the school to ensure that the school is a safe place for all children. Harassment, insults, and hate speech are not acceptable responses to a tragic event.

The staff might then share any incidents that have already occurred. If time permits, the staff might discuss these incidents. For example, the adult sharing an incident might describe how she handled it. Then staff might work in pairs or small groups to discuss their ideas for dealing with the incident. Following their conversations in pairs, the staff might discuss the pros and cons of various approaches.

The meeting should produce agreement on concrete steps the school will take to prevent harassment. These steps might include communicating a clear message to students, engaging student leaders, reaching out to parents, and mobilizing community support. (See below.)

2. Communicate a clear message to students

The principal might appear in each classroom, make a brief statement, and co-lead a discussion with the teacher. Or teachers might make the statements and hold discussions with their classes. The particular needs of the school will determine the best approach. It's tricky: You don't want to put ideas in students' heads; but you don't want to wait for a negative incident to occur before you do something.

3. Engage student leaders

A student council already in place may or may not be the best vehicle for mobilizing student leadership. We heard of a middle school with a large Arab American population in which a dean brought together a representative group of student leaders after September 11 to engage their classmates in raising funds for victims' families and creating a "wall of peace" of students' artwork. The group included Arab American students, but also, intentionally, some "negative leaders" ("my troublemakers," as the dean called them). The dean's approach was excellent, for research shows that one of the best ways to overcome bias and stereotypes is for people of different backgrounds to work together toward a common goal.

4. Reach out to parents

The principal can write a letter to all parents expressing the school's commitment to ensuring the safety and well-being of all students, outlining the steps the staff is taking, and asking for the parents' support. The principal, teachers, and guidance counselors might also organize a school-wide parent meeting to hear parents' concerns and discuss these and other issues arising from the tragedy.

5. Mobilize community support

We have heard of instances in which Arab American children were harassed on the way to school, not by other students

we have heard of instances in which Arab American children were harassed on the way to school, not by other students but by members of the community. To address this kind of harassment, the principal, parent leaders, and school staff will have to reach out to community leaders, storekeepers, police officers, local clergy, and other people influential in the community, and enlist their support to ensure children's safety.

6. Provide opportunities for learning more

Schools are natural places for young people (as well as school staff, parents, and members of the community) to learn about political and social issues that affect them. Schools can organize teach-ins, forums, and video presentations, drawing on experts from local universities and community leaders of Arab, South Asian, and Muslim backgrounds.

Source URL: <http://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/countering-anti-muslim-anti-arab-bias-our-schools>

Links:

[1] <http://www.morningsidecenter.org/users/tom-roderick>

[2] <http://www.adc.org/media/press-releases/2013/april-2013/special-advisory-be-cautious-report-hate-crimes-and-discrimination-immediately/>