

“Can’t We All Just Get Along? Dealing with Hate & Bias”

NEA Safe Schools Now Network Broadcast #7 Broadcast Segment

Discussion Guide

Overview

In the seventh NEA Safe Schools Now broadcast, *“Can’t We All Just Get Along? Dealing With Hate and Bias,”* we highlight specific programs that create inclusive, bias-free environments in school communities. These programs promote violence prevention by confronting school culture issues such as harassment, racism, homophobia, and gender bias. Students share their experiences with these issues and guide us to a better understanding of what it’s like to be “different” or to be perceived as “different.” School staff, students, parents, community members, and a panel of professionals provide details on the structure and rationale behind the programs examined in the broadcast.

First, we hear what some students have to say about their personal experiences with hate and bias. Then we learn about *Anytown*, a program offered by the National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ). *Anytown* is a one-week residential experience designed to reduce discriminatory incidents and hate crimes among youth and to empower youth to have a positive impact on their increasingly multi-cultural environment. We observe students participating in very powerful interpersonal activities as part of the Anytown experience. Following the residential experience, the participants commit to work on their own school’s multi-cultural committee, which advises school principals on diversity issues. Students also commit to 100 hours of community service, which includes mentoring and leading discussion groups for middle school students. We then observe Osceola Middle School students who engage in activities designed to make them aware of stereotypes and the harmful effects they may have on their classmates.

Next we visit with high school students in Naperville, Illinois who created a Gay Straight Alliance. Students speak out about the hate and bias that gay and lesbian students’ experience on a regular basis at school and at home. They describe their efforts to persuade their local school board to amend the existing anti-harassment policy to include protection for gay and lesbian students. The students presented their school board with testimony about how hated and unprotected they felt in their schools; about the homophobic slurs, shoves, and death threats they endured; and about the incidence of suicide attempts among gay and lesbian youth. They also enlisted a group of parents and community members to support their cause. The compromise policy ultimately adopted by the school board mentions sexual orientation but doesn’t specifically prohibit harassment on that basis. We also hear from adults who describe the bias and discrimination they observe in the school setting and who underscore the need to take a stand against biased attitudes and behavior.

Finally, we visit Palm Beach County, Florida to learn how a program called “Aggressors, Victims, and Bystanders” breaks the code of silence among students, dispels the negative impact of rumors, and gives students the skills to deal with troublesome situations. The program is implemented by the Palm Beach County Safe Schools Center who recruits local law enforcement officers and selected school resource officers to teach the research-based curriculum. In most incidents of school violence perpetrated by youth, peers are aware of the impending threat and share this information among themselves, yet are reluctant to inform the adults in their schools. This curriculum teaches students that to effectively prevent acts of violence, everyone must share responsibility for the social environment - there are no true “bystanders.” Because extreme emotional detachment from their victims makes it possible for aggressors to perpetrate their acts, the curriculum also

helps young people empathize and relate to others further preventing violence and victimization. We observe 6th grade students describe a key element of the curriculum, the “Think First” Model, which students use when confronted with incidents of aggression. Our program closes with a poem authored by Kara Pineiro, an Osceola Middle School student, entitled “Can’t We All Just Get Along?”

Notes/Suggestions to Discussion Leader

Make copies of all questions (Sections I, II, III) and distribute them at appropriate times before and after the broadcast. When watching the taped broadcast, you may stop and start the videotape at appropriate discussion points.

I. Questions to think about as you watch the broadcast

Think about the following questions to better understand the problem of hate and bias in schools and the elements of successful practices and programs to reduce it.

- How does the “Anytown” concept work? Why do you suppose the “Anytown” experience takes place in a residential setting? How important do you think the follow-up activities, once “Anytown” ends, are for the success of the “Anytown” program?
- What are the real life experiences of local students who have witnessed or experienced harassment – especially around their own stated or perceived sexual orientation?
- Should school districts be explicit about including sexual orientation in its anti-harassment policy?
- What are the key components of the “Aggressors, Victims, and Bystanders” program? Why do you think the program is successful?
- What are some strategies that work in dealing with harassment at school? What are some common characteristics of successful violence prevention programs?
- What is the role of the school employee in helping to prevent and manage harassment in schools? What is the role of the teachers’ association, parents, and school board in protecting all students from harassment?

II. Questions to think about after you watch the broadcast

Think about the following questions to help you better understand the issues of hate and bias as they relate to your own school and community.

- How serious is the problem of bias-based hate and violence in our schools? How are the safety needs of diverse student populations currently addressed in our schools and community?
- What procedures do we have in place to deal with the harassment of students? Is what we have adequate? If not, what is needed?
- Can any of the programs we viewed in this broadcast be implemented in our schools? What adaptations would need to be made to meet the unique needs of our school community? What obstacles might we encounter in establishing these programs and how might we overcome them?

- Is forming a Gay Straight Alliance, such as what we saw in Naperville, IL, viable in our school? What steps would we have to take to form such an alliance? How would our school and community respond?

III. Next steps

Discuss the following questions to begin a plan of action that may result in reduction of hate and bias in our schools.

- Do we want to plan a meeting to continue this discussion? If so, who should organize and plan the next gathering? Who should we invite to join us?
- What additional information do we need to gather to move forward?
- Do we want to watch the next NEA Safe Schools Now Network broadcast as a group? Who should we invite to join us? Who should organize and lead the discussion?
- Are there other steps we might take in light of what we've just seen?