

Awareness, response curtail biased language in school

Have you found yourself in the uncomfortable circumstance when a student, parent, or colleague uses biased language in school? When a student makes a biased or hurtful statement, action is needed to defuse the situation. By ensuring staff and students speak up against biased language, you can improve school climate and enhance student development.

Key points

- Respond immediately to biased, hurtful words
- Ensure staff and student education on appropriateness
- Model appropriate language, behavior in school

“Our silence speaks for us,” said Michelle Nutter, Safe and Supportive Schools manager for the Center for Safe Schools in Camp Hill, Pa. “If we’re silent in the face of a harmful or hurtful statement, we may send an implied message

of agreement. Every time we hear biased language, we need to speak up.”

Nutter provided the following tips for educators to reduce biased language:

- **Respond immediately.** When educators hear a biased remark or joke, they should respond immediately in every circumstance. “Think about how you’re going to respond if you hear biased language to improve your actual response,” Nutter said. “It doesn’t have to be a confrontational response, but it should acknowledge that the words are inappropriate.” For instance, the teacher may say, “We treat everybody with respect in this classroom.” Some teachers may simply use a word like ‘ouch’ if they hear something harsh that a student says, Nutter said. “That’s a signal that the student should stop using the language.” Nutter advocated a four-pronged approach:

1. Interrupt the biased language and step in to ensure the student stops the speech.

2. Question students by asking why it was said. Talk to the student about why they made a biased statement.

3. Educate students to explain why such speech is harmful or offensive.

4. Echoing occurs when the teacher affirms when a student steps in to question biased language.

Keep in mind that the school setting will often dictate the strategy. For instance, “if a teacher is watching the playground and hears harmful speech,

she will probably interrupt it without investing time to educate,” Nutter said. “However, the opportunity to question and educate in class helps create teachable moments for all students.”

- **Train teachers to ensure awareness.** Teachers need to understand what biased language is. “Teaching Tolerance from the Southern Poverty Law Center has resources about speaking up at school and responding to bias and stereotypes,” Nutter said. “That’s a resource for teachers on why it’s fundamentally important to speak up when they hear biased words or phrases. Also, state Department of Education offices have published materials on building inclusive classroom environments.” Be sure to set expectations for staff by helping them understand their role and the expectations, Nutter said. Encourage them to listen to student chatter to hear the words that are being used in school. “There are colloquial expressions and new words are added to student’s lexicon that teachers may not know,” Nutter said. “Use resources such as Google and UrbanDictionary.com when you hear an expression to determine if it’s appropriate for the school setting

- **Walk the talk.** “Teachers and administrators should be talking to each other — and to students — with dignity and respect,” Nutter said. Ensure your school has anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies to back up the expectations. If the student’s behavior doesn’t conform to expectations, you can rely on the policy to address it, Nutter said.

- **Get parents on board.** Set the standard that speech in the school environment should be respectful. Rules and expectations in school may be different than the rules and expectations at home. “It can be difficult for students to navigate what they can say at home versus what they can say in school,” Nutter said. “As we educate students, we can also educate parents about treating everybody with dignity and respect.”

- **Sidestep pitfalls.** There may be instances when people shy away from weighing in on biased language. “For example, during the 2016 election cycle, there was a lot of rhetoric and anti-immigration speech,” Nutter said. “Teachers may have felt they couldn’t weigh in because it could have been construed as a political statement.” Help teachers understand that when comments create a hostile environment, those comments can’t be allowed to continue. “If we don’t address it, we allow speech that intimidates students,” Nutter said.

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