

The Four Motivations for Raising Our Standards for Student Interaction

By Aaron Boe, MSED.

Bullying has become a greater topic of concern throughout the world over the past decade. This has led to statewide mandates and increased pressure on schools and teachers. Educators, however, are often told by those outside of their classrooms about a new issue on which they must focus. One of the challenges with this is that previously important issues are not expected to be de-emphasized. It is challenging when we feel more is added to our plate of responsibilities while nothing is taken away. Naturally, defenses can arise when we are told by those from the outside what we must do inside our classrooms and schools. Educators will often comment that they have seen various objectives “come and go” over the years and that this one will pass too. This can lead to a reluctance to truly become engaged in what may appear to be just another new idea from those who don’t really understand what goes on in schools anyway.

The challenge of meeting the diverse needs of students will not go away. The emphasis on meeting standards also will be a part of education for the foreseeable future. Finally, for better or worse, mandates and pressure will continue to come from those outside the walls of our school buildings. Each educator will adopt his or her own perspective and actions to address this issue. The following four motivations are offered as an alternative to pressure. They are offered as *support* for those on the “front lines” who work each day in an extremely challenging position. Not all educators will be motivated to become fully engaged in this issue for the same reasons, but it seems clear that sufficient reasons do exist, whether they have been previously explained to educators or not.

1. Avert a Tragedy

There is no profile for the type of school where extreme violence can erupt. From the small town school to the affluent suburban school, adults have been shocked by students’ willingness to traumatize or kill others. Those students who have acted with extreme violence have sited the abuse of other students to explain their wish for vengeance. More often, students will turn this extreme violence upon themselves and take their own life.

Those who exert power in extreme ways on others or themselves feel a lack of significance, power or control over their lives. By making sure that all students feel accepted and encouraged by their teachers and parents, challenges will still exist, but we can eliminate the need for extreme behavior in them. By proactively connecting students with other students, we can meet a primary need and potentially make up for a student’s disconnectedness to adults.

2. Improve the Educational Environment

If a student feels harassed, threatened, or harshly teased, it is virtually impossible to care about the subject being taught. It is essential to understand that it makes the job of teaching much harder or impossible when bullying distracts a student.

3. On Principle, Every Young Person Has the Right to Feel Safe

Often we are tempted to tell a student to ignore those who would bully him or her. Although some students may be able to do that effectively, it is a dangerous mentality on our part to want to disregard harassing behavior. I like to use two analogies to serve us in this area. First, it is possible that decades ago, some young people could have ignored racist comments directed at them. Now, however, most people feel strongly that no student should ever have to suffer cruelty based on the absurd notion that one is inferior because of race. Secondly, it is possible that decades ago, some women could have ignored sexual harassment in the workplace. When they complained of distracting or disturbing treatment, they often met the responses of, "Just ignore it," "Oh, that's just men being men," or "What do you expect us to do about it if nobody saw it?" The answer to racism and sexual harassment was the widespread belief an individual's right to feel safe and free from harassment. The answer to bullying is a widespread belief in every individual's right to feel safe and secure in school.

4. The Ability to Interact Positively with Others is an Essential Success Skill

We do not serve a young person by allowing him or her to continue to treat others harshly. Ironically, a young person is often trying to increase his or her popularity by mistreating others. As adults, we must recognize that in order for an individual to be both happy and successful in this world, it is essential to be able to interact well with others—including those who are different. If we take the notion seriously of equipping young people with the knowledge and skills they will need to be successful in the world of tomorrow, it is clear that an appreciation of diversity will be an essential attitude. We must clearly communicate that diversity is not simply a matter of skin color. Effective teams, organizations, and even families are composed of individuals with different personalities, behavior styles, strengths and opinions.

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