



Creating the Space to Talk About Race in Your School



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Racial dynamics, disparities and divisions permeate our society, communities, schools and classrooms. Systemic racism is so deeply rooted in our history, culture and institutions that there's no escaping it. Visible or not, its impacts are ever-present. Yet, discussions of racism are

typically not part of school culture or curriculum and because racism is so complex and contentious, many of us are afraid to even broach the subject. Fears of opening a can of worms, stirring the pot and making a mistake, can be paralyzing. It often feels easier and safer to avoid the topic altogether.

Silence and inaction, though, reinforce the status quo.

Avoidance speaks volumes—it communicates to students of color that racism doesn't matter enough to warrant attention and, by omission, invalidates their experiences, perspectives, identities—and lives. White students, on the other hand, often see racism being accepted and normalized, without acknowledgment or accountability. And the lofty ideal of educational excellence and equity for all

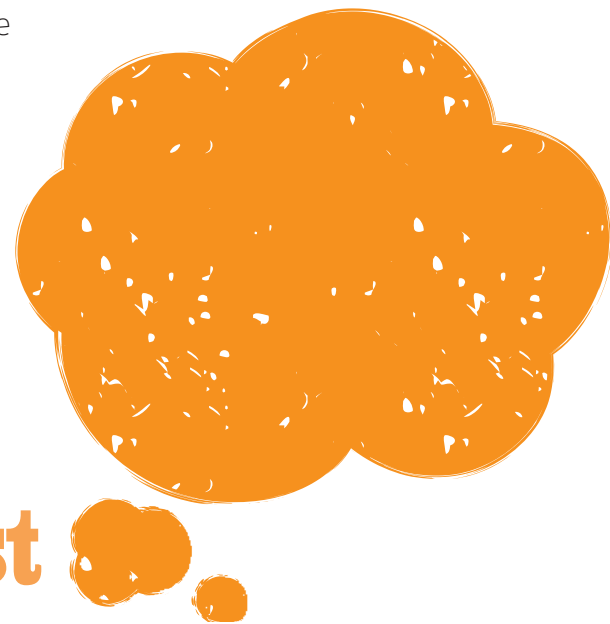
students, if it even exists at your school, may seem like a hollow commitment.

As educators, there are “teachable moments,” opportunities to constructively and productively address race. Discussions in your classroom, the lunch room or even on the school bus can be a steppingstone to addressing race in your school community and school district. Creating the space to talk about race can open the way for some of the most powerful learning and change

that you, your students, your colleagues, and your school will ever experience.

The following tips can help you make race conversations normal, constructive and successful. These skills are best learned through collective dialogue with others committed to addressing racial equity, as well as through lots of practice. When discussions of race and racism become normalized, the promise of equity can be realized.

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- 1.** Create a welcoming classroom and school community. Every school community and classroom has its own culture and learning climate. When you make equity and inclusion prominent priorities in your norms, routines and environment, students will feel a greater sense of belonging, safety, trust, and openness. Balance participation and learning opportunities. Create a supportive school culture and hold an affirming space for all students.

The more you can form authentic relationships and connections with all students and their families, the more you will understand them--especially those who typically face the most marginalization, such as students of color, LGBT students, students from low-income families, English language learners, new immigrants, and students with physical or learning disabilities.
- 2.** Root out biases and barriers: Everyone, regardless of race, can have unconscious racial bias. Be willing to examine your own bias and the ways you may be privileged or unaware. Reflect upon all aspects of your educational practice. Could your curriculum, pedagogy, grading, classroom management, support services or disciplinary practices be preferencing some students while disadvantaging others? Are there any barriers to learning and success that some students may be experiencing? What are the racial impacts of different policies and practices at your school and school district?
- 3.** Encourage self-expression: Give students the ability and validation to bring their full racial and cultural identities into your school so they can be themselves and speak their truths. Discussions can begin by giving students an opportunity to share their experiences, perspectives or stories. Identify and appreciate points of connection, as well as differences. Give students permission to only share what they want. Don't put anyone on the spot or expect any individual to represent their racial or cultural group. Your students may be your best teachers about matters of race, each with unique experience and expertise.
- 4.** Be open yourself: Be willing to share different dimensions of your own racial identity and cultural background. Be open about your experience with racial inequities and/or racial privilege and any efforts you've participated in to advance racial justice. How has your racial identity been both a strength and a challenge in your life? What have you learned along the way, what were your mistakes, and what are you still learning?
- 5.** Engage, Don't Avoid. Racism is perpetuated by silence—and silence is complicity. Being "color-blind" often serves as a pretense to downplay the significance of race, deny the existence of racism, and erase the experience of students of color. Be willing to lead the uncomfortable conversations and turn them into moments of learning. Learn to break through your own discomfort to embrace the tensions and unknowns.

6. Create opportunities for discussion: Use current events, cultural happenings and local angles to spark relevant and meaningful discussions among your students. Pop culture (e.g. music, movies, sports, celebrities) is particularly engaging for young people, supplying continuous fodder for important race conversations.

7. Talk about racism and racial equity: If you want to get real about race, you have to also be willing to talk about racism and racial equity. Racism is experienced at many levels—internalized, interpersonal, institutional and structural.

Race is not simply an individual characteristic or cultural identity. More significantly, it is a social category and a power dynamic – a marker of a racial group’s positional power in society. Racial identities are socially assigned, regardless of how you self-identify. While attention to diversity (variety) is important, it is even more critical to address equity (fairness or justice), since racism is fundamentally about power. Racial equity (or racial justice) is the systematic fair treatment of all people, resulting in fair opportunities and outcomes for everyone. Racial equity is not just the absence of discrimination but also the presence of values and systems that ensure fairness and justice.

8. Establish and enforce group norms: Since conversations about race can be difficult and divisive, establish some agreements before you begin the conversation. Allow students to generate, agree to, and hold each other accountable to, their own norms. Display these agreements and refer back to them, as needed. Decide upfront on the goals and parameters of the conversation—what you are and are not going to address.

9. Process is as important as content: If you expect a challenging conversation, take time to get centered and take some deep breaths together. Try to be fully present with each other, without any distractions. Pay attention not only to what is being said (or not being said), but also to how it is being said, and who is saying it (or who is not speaking). Expect to do more facilitating and process management, with the content of the conversation mostly generated in real time by your students.

10. Model your values and vision: Practice equity, inclusion, empathy and respect in your school. Your actions, more than your words, will have the greatest impact on students. They are looking to their school role models for leadership and ally-ship. You can play a formative role in helping them build critical skills for navigating the complexities of race.

For the full discussion guide and more information, tools and resources on Racial Justice in Education, including books to read and member-to-member engagement opportunities, please visit our Racial Justice in Education EdCommunities page at <http://bit.ly/racialjusticeineducation>.