

Tips for maintaining safe and respectful environments during unsettling times

News reports of the tragedy in New Zealand may trigger strong emotions that can provoke racial tensions. We need to particularly focus on making sure that every student, staff member, parent and community member feels safe, accepted and respected.

Keep the emphasis on maintaining a positive environment

It's important to watch for any sign of racial tensions emerging among students, staff or community, and to make sure that no students are becoming the target of hostility or blame. Ideally, schools can prevent racial tensions from occurring by taking positive, proactive action.

Here are some suggestions to help you maintain a safe and respectful environment:

- **Model acceptance and respect diversity.** Children take their emotional cues from significant adults in their lives, and will follow the example set by those adults.
- Review and build on **diversity education** programs that already exist in your school. Remind students about what they have learned this year about diversity and about activities in which they participated. Ask them to reflect on what they learned previously and how they can apply it to this situation.
- Take this opportunity to help your students **learn more about diverse communities.**
- Use **books and other resources** to explore the issues of prejudice and acceptance of diversity. The kit prepared by Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario called [*Social Justice Begins With Me*](#) is a good resource.
- Give students **clear messages** about the importance of diversity. These messages may include the following:
 - Canada is strong because of its diversity. Remind students that Canada is a safe and peaceful country with a reputation worldwide for its integration of every nationality, culture and religion.
 - All people deserve to be treated with fairness, respect and dignity.
 - Encourage students and staff to refrain from comments that undermine a positive and respectful environment or that may be hurtful to others.
 - Let students know that you expect them to be respectful in all ways. For example, there is no tolerance for students making jokes about the situation.
 - Violence and hate are not the solutions to anger.
 - Try not to focus on who is "bad" and who is "good," but rather on how debilitating hate and dissension can be. Emphasize how tragic it is that hate exists and the negative impact hate-based activities can have on all of us.
 - Groups of people should not be judged by the actions of a few.
 - Use this situation as a teachable moment to focus on the values of the school and the Peel District School Board. The lesson here is that hate, distrust, lack of tolerance is damaging at any level. It's easy, at times such as these, to focus on blame – on labeling certain other groups as "the bad guys." Anything that reinforces stereotypes is a lesson missed and an opportunity wasted.

Watch for warning signs of tension

The best way to manage conflict between groups is to look for signs that tension is building. Look for patterns of incidents and behaviour that may be warning signs of tension.

- Continue to be vigilant for any signs of inappropriate behaviour and reprisals against any students based on their faith or country of origin – for example, verbal or physical harassment such as:
 - insults
 - name calling
 - blaming
 - intimidation
 - hate-based graffiti

Other warning signs include the following:

- an increase in self-segregation by any individual students
- certain ethnic groups of students segregating themselves from other students
- an increase in the number of rumors generated by students, parents or staff
- flyers or other material or objects with racial overtones
- vandalism that targets specific individuals or groups of individuals
- an increase in the number of concerns expressed by parents

Take immediate action to address any problems

- Remind students and staff to **report any incidents immediately** to the principal/vice-principal. In situations involving students, administrators will investigate allegations.
- Encourage students to **talk to a teacher or administrator** if they have concerns about the behaviour of a fellow student or if they know of a student who is being harassed or intimidated. Explain that their co-operation is important for everybody's safety. The best way they can help a fellow student who is having difficulty is by involving a staff member.
- Inform students that those found to have engaged in inappropriate or discriminatory behaviour may be disciplined. Staff who engage in such behaviour may face disciplinary action.
- Be aware of inappropriate conversations that may take place between adults within earshot of students – for example, parents talking in the schoolyard. Simply say, "This isn't a good place to talk about this."