

Creating The Whole School Learning Environment

This curriculum is delivered most successfully when there is a positive, inclusive environment in a classroom. An inclusive learning environment is one in which all students feel free to ask questions and feel safe to learn. It is structured to allow choice, student involvement, sharing, freedom to explore, and flexibility in presentation.

Teachers can affect attitudinal change by connecting and respecting – not isolating or judging. By listening to students’ ideas, hopes, and fears, and by addressing teasing, they demonstrate to students that people really do care and understand. Confront troublesome issues in the classroom, and determine reasons for conflict, rather than ignoring or covering them up. Use a problem solving wheel or “Think, Talk, Walk” strategy to assist students in reducing conflict.

Ask the children questions such as these:

- Why did you say that?
- Why did you think that?
- Is that true?
- How does that comment make others feel?
- Can you find other words to say that?
- How do we all feel about that?
- What are some positive solutions for you to use?

A positive learning environment is promoted when the teacher:

- ✓ role models dignity and respect for everyone;
- ✓ affords all students access, voice, and fosters skills;
- ✓ values difference;
- ✓ celebrates uniqueness;
- ✓ addresses bias and stereotypes;
- ✓ supports healthy relations and human rights;
- ✓ examines the social structure of the classroom, school, and playground;
- ✓ teaches communication and co-operative skills;
- ✓ remembers that problem solving and relationship skills add to community building;
- ✓ encourages goal setting and conflict resolution programs as these lead to collaborative behaviour;
- ✓ utilizes active listening, reflective activities, empathy training, and assertive speaking in the classroom;
- ✓ provides opportunities for students to ask questions and voice their feelings;
- ✓ encourages all students to share personal experiences;
- ✓ discusses student concerns in a just, fair, safe, and supportive manner;
- ✓ stops put-downs and name-calling;
- ✓ encourages students to question stereotypes found in literature;
- ✓ teaches violence-awareness skills to end harassment;
- ✓ provides positive reinforcement to students for their accomplishments;
- ✓ compliments students on their capabilities and inner strengths;
- ✓ awards caring, supportive behaviour; and
- ✓ recognizes those who do social justice work.

Evaluate your own classroom learning environment and the school climate at large using a checklist such as the following:

Safe School Environment Checklist

- Is there a program of social skills where students can practise specific strategies and alternative behaviours?
- Are the students learning and playing co-operative games in gym and at recess?
- Is teasing and bullying stopped when it occurs by both students and staff?
- Does your school have visual cues (posters, "hands off" messages, Problem Solving Wheels), to help children remember the rules of the school and how to treat others?
- Are students encouraged to use these visual cues to set the standard of behaviour for everyone?
- Do you talk to your class and engage in activities that encourage empathy, problem solving, assertiveness, and appreciation of others?
- Is there a plan to prevent possible bullying and harassment?
- Do you provide role-play situations where students can experience a variety of roles?
- Do you allow students to discuss feelings and ways to help?
- Do you provide opportunities for students to voice their feelings through any of the following experiences: journal writing, artistic posters, recorded projects, drama presentations, puppet plays, reading responses, suggestion box, school announcements, raps, poetry, or songs?

A more complete resource for classroom, playground, and school wide strategies can be found in the ETFO publication *The School That Equity Built*. It is available online from shopETFO at www.etfo.ca or telephone the ETFO office and ask for shopETFO at 1-888-838-3836 or fax 416-642-2424.