Changing the Culture:
Ideas for Student Action

DRAFT

February 23, 2012

Anne Collier, Susan Swearer, Mia Doces, and Lisa Jones*

The Kinder & Braver World Project: Research Series (danah boyd and John Palfrey, editors)

Brought to you by the Born This Way Foundation & the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, and supported by the John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

* Anne Collier is co-director of ConnectSafely.org and executive director of Net Family News, Inc., a nonprofit organization. Susan Swearer is a professor of school psychology at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln, co-director of the Bullying Research Network, and a licensed psychologist dedicated to helping improve youth mental health. Mia Doces is Senior Programs and Media Specialist at Committee for Children. Lisa Jones is a research associate professor of psychology at the University of New Hampshire and the Crimes Against Children Research Center.

The purpose of this document is to provide positive action items that students can take to make their schools and communities healthier places and to challenge meanness and cruelty. It is presented as a list of ideas. While none of these initiatives have been evaluated, they are grounded in a research-driven understanding of interventions, practices, and actions that can be helpful in improving school culture.

Specific Actions outlined in more detail below include:

1. Co-create a Culture-Change Project
2. Establish a Take Back Our School Honor Code
3. Conduct a School Culture Assessment Survey
4. Develop a Surface-the-Wisdom Survey
5. Develop an Action Plan for student response to tragic or violent incidents
6. Advocate for Social-emotional Learning
7. Get involved in Cultural Change at your district's middle school(s) [For high school students]
8. Create a "Friend Zone"
9. Celebrate "Random Acts of Kindness" (or Respect)
10. Get Student Government involved in Culture Change
11. Develop a Wisdom-Gathering Video Project
12. Dare to be different

INTRODUCTION

While tremendous work has gone into evaluating the efficacy of school curricula, little is known about student-driven initiatives. All we have are case studies that are highly celebrated, with no evidence as to how they actually played out. Given this, it is impossible for us to craft a clear how-to for students – especially since the greatest inspiration in most cases comes from the students themselves. Instead, we are offering various examples of initiatives that exist out there.

Those working to encourage and implement student-driven initiatives should consider a **two-pronged approach**:

1. Work with students to help generate a larger list of initiatives that they've started. Get as much information as possible and document their initiatives.

2. With researcher and youth input, assess the efficacy of these student-led initiatives to determine what works. Celebrate success stories. Work to scale such programs.

In terms of the efficacy of student-led initiatives, there are also two important notes to highlight:

1. Student-led initiatives work best when students are engaged with and supported by a competent, trained adult.

2. Students who can engage with and motivate a diverse group of other students tend to be more effective than those who try to operate on their own.

SPECIFIC ACTIONS FOR STUDENTS

This section outlines a variety of specific actions students could choose to take:

1.   Co-create a culture-change project for your school

Adopt one or more grassroots projects that have reduced aggression against and/or marginalization of people in schools and other organizations and communities.

Action: Research and identify social actions or projects that have been developed by students in other schools (in the US and other countries), projects that are meaningful to your group and particular context, and that you feel would be meaningful to your school or student body. Choose one to adopt and implement.

Possible examples follow:
- Pink Shirt Day in Canada, which mobilizes students and adults to express their opposition to bullying by wearing pink on one day of the year. The mobilization began with the actions of two high school seniors to show their solidarity for victims of bullying by taking a stand within their school.
- Students in a West Virginia high school created "The Friend Zone"; others in New Mexico are linking up anti-bullying clubs across schools and using social media to hold educators accountable statewide.

2.   Establish a Take Back Our School Honor Code

Create an honor code for your student body that stands for creating and maintaining a Culture of Respect. The Honor Code is aimed at establishing civil, respectful behavior as a social norm and marginalizing disrespect, social aggression, and bullying.

Action: Organize a group or lobby the Student Council to create an honor code that you commit to. Work to get buy-in from the whole student body.

3.   Conduct a School Culture Assessment Survey

Help assess your schools' strengths and weaknesses by polling your student body regarding their perception of how much of a problem your school has with bullying or social aggression.

Action: Ask your administration for permission to use 10-15 min. of "home room" or class time to have all students take a survey. If your school has implemented a bullying prevention program, use the survey that comes with that program (*see:* http://www.hazelden.com).

If your school already has students take the national YRBS (Youth Risk Behavior Survey), then you and other students can access your school's data. (The survey includes 1-2 items on bullying; while not comprehensive, it's a decent barometer). Or, if you would like a comprehensive survey that assesses bullying and victimization, use the Bully Survey (*see*: http://www.bullysurvey.com).

Discuss what you want to do with the results – how to use them to inform the school community and promote culture change. As a possible follow-up project, you could invite fellow students to be interviewed on video about what they learned from participating in and reading the results of the survey. Consider editing and posting those interviews as a single video and/or presenting it to the student body at an event you organize.

4.   Develop a Surface-the-Wisdom Survey

To gather ideas for culture-change action, create a survey that asks students one question: "How can we change the culture of (or maintain a culture of respect at) our school?"

Action: Get the school administration's support for using an online survey tool to conduct this single-question survey. Form a staff/student committee to pick the Top 10 most insightful answers, and present those to the whole school (e.g., one a day during announcements, on a single page in a school newspaper, or in a school assembly where each one is read by a different student representing all the grades and solid diversity). If you hold an assembly, videotape it, and put the Top 10 into a video posted to YouTube and/or your school site, explaining in the video description that students are reading other (anonymous) students' ideas.

Another option: Announce that you'll be doing a Culture Change Project and you want everybody in the school to think of an answer to the above question because your video production team will be doing on-the-spot ("man on the street") video interviews asking the above question during lunch and between classes. Gather at least 100 answers and edit them down to 5-10 great ones to present to the student body and/or parents and families at or as part of an event you and the administration have organized.

5.   Develop an Action Plan for student response to tragic or violent incidents in your school community

Action: Put together a group of students or ask for class or after-school time to discuss what the components would be (students committee? meetings? expected

outcomes?), design and document the plan, decide whether/how to inform the administration and the rest of the student body. You might ask yourselves questions like (you can probably come up with better ones on your own): How can we make sure this doesn't happen again? How can we encourage reflection, learning, and healing as outcomes? What needs to be changed, and what can we students do about that?

6.   Advocate for Social-Emotional Learning at your school

Research shows that social-emotional learning or literacy (SEL) improves academic performance, critical thinking, creativity, social skills, problem-solving, and emotional wellbeing – all of which is good for individuals as well as their communities, including school communities.

Action: Ask administrators if they're considering SEL training for staff and students at your school. If so, ask if students can be involved in implementation and offer your support. If not, research available programs that you feel would work for your school community (*see* http://casel.org/in-schools/selecting-programs/), pick your Top 5, and design a plan for working with the administration, district officials, or your school board (for example, consider making a presentation at a public school board meeting) to choose and implement the best program for your school. Help to get everybody's buy-in, including students' parents and families.

7.   [High School Students] Get involved in Cultural Change at your district's middle school(s)

Action: Middle school students look up to high school students. Team up with students at your middle school to help your local middle school students create a culture of respect at their school (which will have a lot of positive impact on your school in the future, when they're in high school). This may call for working with your school counselor, psychologist, or risk-prevention specialist to determine the best ways to work with middle school students – e.g., in small groups or classrooms.

8.   Create a "Friend Zone" in the lunchroom

Action: Create a "friend zone" in the lunchroom for students who feel threatened, marginalized, or for other reasons can't find someone to sit with at lunch or may need support in other parts of the school and school day.

Action: Establish a group of students who are willing to watch over the well-being of other students. Publicize that a friend zone exists during every lunch period and make sure that at least 2 members of the friend-zone group are sitting at a table with space for anyone who needs someone to sit with – a "new kid," someone feeling marginalized or threatened, etc. Make it clear that the group doesn't "require"

anybody to be friends with anybody – that you're just creating a safe space for people to be (nothing required of anybody), that by "safety" you mean a place of respect, no judgment, etc.

9. **Celebrate "Random Acts of Kindness" (or Respect) in your school and your community at large and/or create a Random Acts of Respect Day**

Action: Develop a plan for raising awareness of how this helps change the overall culture. It might include creating as large a group as possible of students interested in looking – school halls, lunchroom, locker rooms, games, events, etc. – for expressions of respect for others and recording them on papers, in cell phones, etc. The plan would probably have to include a way to bring recognition to, or celebrate, these acts and expressions (e.g. have the group compile a list on a Web page or FB group, make periodic announcements,).

This project might expand to include the showcasing of acts of kindness or respect by students of all grade levels, as well as by staff and faculty, throughout your district – through an event and/or publishing photos of and descriptions of their actions in a school newspaper or yearbook. [An example of a not-so-little random act was a couple of upperclassmen in Nova Scotia noticing a freshman being harassed for wearing a pink shirt and deciding to wear pink shirts all the time themselves in solidarity, basically burying the harassment in kindness, which caused it to stop (*see*: http://www.netfamilynews.org/?p=30070).]

Another Option: Introduce the game "Cruel 2 B Kind" to your school or your community: http://www.cruelgame.com. Or develop your own social game where an increase in kindness benefits everyone.

10. **Get Student Government involved in Culture Change - make it part of student leaders' agenda, election campaigns, and/or the Student Council's work**

Action: Form a student political action committee (PAC) to promote a culture-change agenda. Write a "platform" for a culture of respect. Either put forward a candidate or support one likely to run on a culture-change platform. Help the Student Council make the creation or maintenance of a culture of respect a top priority. Develop materials to promote this agenda at all grade levels. Support and celebrate administrators and faculty who give their support to this agenda. If the school has a multidisciplinary team for maintaining school policy that includes students, try to ensure that team is on board with the PAC's mission; if the team doesn't include students, lobby to get members of the PAC onto that team so they can work with it to maintain a culture of respect in investigations into incidents and disciplinary decisions.

Another option: Encourage your PAC or Student Council to vet your school's policy on investigating bullying incidents and student discipline. If these are not handled by

a multidisciplinary team involving students, draw up a proposal for changing that to present to your administration, school district, or school board.

11. Develop a Wisdom-Gathering Video Project to enhance the school community's learning about the impact of bullying and social aggression

Action: As an extracurricular Culture Change Project, videotape interviews with school staff (bus drivers, cafeteria workers, teachers, librarians, tech coordinators, counselors, administrators, and janitors). Invite them to talk about their own personal and professional experiences with bullying, and edit and post a video sharing the best of their insights. You could also organize an event around the presentation of this video, introducing the administrators, faculty, and staff who supported the project.

A similar project: might also be done with students' parents and other family members, but start with school personnel. A possible next step would be a video project that gathers wisdom on how to deal with bullying, grow resilience, and increase empathy.

12. Dare to be different

Challenge social cruelty in your school by publicly committing to standing up to it – and standing for civility or social intelligence.

Action: Create a list of commitments and publicly vow to uphold them. Examples: 1) If you see bullying, don't just ignore it. Talk to the victim and offer support. Don't encourage or reinforce the bully. 2) Work hard to make sure that your friends recognize when you're being funny, teasing, or making a joke. 3) Stand up for kindness. Stand up for differentness. 4) Refuse to accept language that is homophobic (e.g., "faggot") or that which insults people based on their abilities (e.g., "retard") or appearance.