

HOW CAN I LEAD MY SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY TO BECOME A BULLY-FREE PLACE FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES?

Journalist and novelist, Anatole French, once proclaimed that “nine tenths of education is encouragement.” We as a community can create spaces in schools and other learning centers that lead to environments in which students with autism and other developmental disabilities can feel encouraged to truly prosper. I can personally lead my school by advocating for students with autism and other developmental disabilities, and come up with new ideas for how to better my community to counter the issue of bullying.

One suggestion that would greatly aid the development of bully-free zones in schools would be the offering of classes and workshops that would educate students on how to treat those around them, specifically if they have developmental disabilities. Growing up, we are often told to “treat everyone equally” regardless of who they are. However, sometimes, those with developmental disabilities may require special attention in order to form bonds with other people. For example, the National Autistic Society recommends that, when speaking to someone with autism, it is pertinent to “always use their name at the beginning [of your initial address] so that they know you are talking to them” (autism.org). In addition, the organization continues to say that when someone is showing signs of anxiety, it is important to “use less non-verbal communication (eg eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, body language)” (autism.org). However, skills like these are not required in the education of neurotypical students, specifically not in NYC, and can cause them to alienate themselves from people with autism. Not necessarily out of malice, but because they do not have the proper skills and techniques that would be

beneficial in said communication to create new bonds and friendships. By implementing workshops and classes in schools that could educate students on such techniques and could possibly be entirely run by volunteers, students will be able to do their part in helping include everyone in the school environment and also lessen the divide between students. Personally, I could help lead this effort of inclusion and unification by educating myself using trusted resources, such as websites and videos from professionals, to learn more about the techniques that could make it easier to form meaningful conversations with my peers who have developmental disabilities. This way I could form new friendships and comfort them if they ever feel isolated or alone.

Another recommendation to schools would be to pursue clubs such as “peer tutoring” for those with autism or other developmental disabilities. This would encourage interactions between those with autism or other developmental disabilities and those without and help, once again, lessen the divide that students may feel between one another. Clubs such as these will create a sense of togetherness and show students that our differences are what make us a unique and beautiful community.

By unifying different students in different classrooms, I can work toward the prevention of bullying in my school and community towards those with autism and other developmental disabilities. Unification can end this divide.