

The logo features the text "DIVERSITY MEMO" in large, bold, white capital letters, with "for teachers" in a smaller, white, lowercase font below it. The background is a dark blue gradient with abstract, concentric circular patterns in lighter shades of blue and green.

# DIVERSITY MEMO

for teachers

## How to help students comprehend the past, present and future of America's racial challenges

When Barack Obama, the first African-American president, became president many students may have begun to think that racism is a thing of the past — a problem for older generations, not theirs. But in spite of this monumental achievement, racism is still a serious challenge for America. As a society, we have a long way to go toward eliminating the damaging beliefs, behaviors and systems associated with discrimination. This New Year, and this new presidency, offers a timely opportunity to engage students in a deeper discussion about racism's past, present and future.

Talking about race has never been easy, especially for high school students, many of whom struggle to understand what it has to do with them. It's natural for young people to think about racism in terms of their individual experience or history ("I wasn't around during slavery!") and their own behavior ("I have no problem with black people — it's not my fault."). Other students are frustrated by what they see as some racial groups' inability to get past historical tragedies such as slavery ("It was 500 years ago, time to move on!") or economic failures ("Anyone can make it in America...look at all the other immigrants.").

So how can teachers challenge these notions, and help students to think in systematic and institutional, rather than solely personal ways, about racism? The educators at RaceBridges Studio, a nonprofit initiative that offers free lesson plans on diversity and tolerance, have these suggestions to open up a dialogue:

- To help students understand how our behaviors and attitudes are largely influenced by our past and our contexts (both good and bad), ask them to map out their personality traits, interests, hobbies and career goals, and connect them to the events, people and other influences that have made them who they are today. Ask them to consider not just people but their education, neighborhood, gender, social class, race, religion and so on.
- Give students a constructive way to share, freely and openly, their feelings about racial divisions. Offer them a fictional story (with historical roots) that highlights discrimination or distrust between two groups of people. Emphasizing that there are no right or wrong answers in this exercise, have them record and discuss their impressions with their classmates.
- Take a current or recent event that has racial significance, and have students analyze what may have led to it. For example, now's a perfect time to take a closer look at the intense interest generated by Barack Obama's successful campaign for the presidency. Encourage students to examine the history of voting acts, reconstruction, Jim Crow laws and the notion of white privilege to better understand the historical impact of this achievement.

These activities are a timely way to show students how history influences the present, and to open up their minds to these complexities both in their own lives and in the lives of individual and groups. By engaging in more thoughtful analysis, educators can help students answer the question, "What's racism got to do with me?"

***For your free copy of the "What's Racism Got to Do with Me?" lesson plan — or for more ideas about how to incorporate diversity lessons in your classroom — see lesson plan at the end of the document***

# **DIVERSITY MEMO: A Welcoming School: Small Changes to Create a Welcoming School**

## **Improving and Enhancing the Corporate Climate of the school community**

**Dear Teacher and Leader,**

There's a lot that we can do to make our classrooms more welcoming, but it is also important that schools as institutions are inclusive at the "macro" level. This resource offers suggestions to make the entire school a more "accessible" and welcoming place to all students.

You might use some of the suggestions below in your classroom, but many of the suggestions are meant to be used at the institutional level. Try getting some teachers together for the larger-scale changes and/or sharing some of these with your administration. For ideas just for your own classroom see *Including Everyone: Small Changes to Create a Welcoming Classroom* at the end of this document.

In this *RaceBridges Diversity Memo*, you'll find some classroom activities and "lesson plan starters," further resources, and some ideas and thoughts to help inspire you on the journey. It takes committed teachers to encourage and shape our schools to be welcoming and open.

This brief lesson-starter invites your students to imagine a future of equality. A whole-classroom action is included at the end.

# Classroom Activities

## Who feels welcomed at your school?



Assign students to go on a “scavenger hunt” around the school (if possible, during class time; otherwise, as they change classes and before and after school. Ask them to find images, words, and references to a variety of groups (male and female; a variety of races and ethnicities; students of different socio-economic classes, physical and intellectual abilities, and language groups, and so on).

For ease of record keeping, you may want to create a chart that lists different groups, locations, type of media, and a way to track how often different groups are represented. When students return with their records, share them with the classroom. Discuss who gets represented and why and what that might say about the culture of the school.

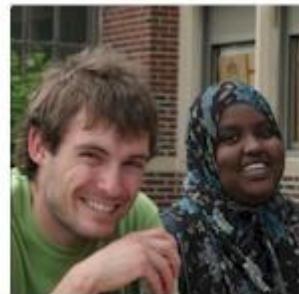
Then facilitate a discussion with students about what else they might examine in the school to see **who** is welcomed at the school. They could include such measures as the school budget, the calendar, how the building gets used, what visitors/speakers are invited to the school, the books assigned in English, what plays are performed, who is elected to various positions in the school, how music is chosen for dances, and so on. Are all represented? Who is left out?

Finally, lead a discussion about what it might be like never to see “yourself” (in gender, race, class, and so forth) represented at school. What message does that send? Which students are more likely to succeed?

**Action:** Collate all the data the class collected, submit a report to the school administration, and then make suggestions about how to make the school more inclusive and welcoming.

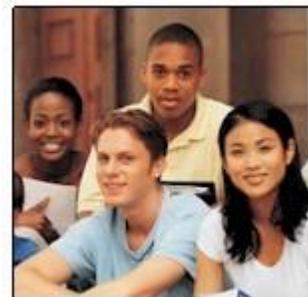
## Some ideas to get started in the classroom

- Have students read one of the stories listed below on the RaceBridges for Schools page. Use those stories (or stories found elsewhere) to discuss how important schools and their environment are to people’s self-understanding and image. Many stories are about the damage done by insensitive school environments; spend time in discussion with students about the good that sensitive school environments might do!
- Often we assume we know which groups feel like insiders and which ones feel like outsiders at schools, but it is true that schools might be marginalizing groups of which they are unaware. Have students in your class create a survey to administer to a sample of the student body asking about which groups are considered insiders and outsiders, who feels overlooked and underrepresented. After studying the results, have students interview one another about how to address feelings of exclusion. Create a proposal for the administration.



## Check these out before diving into the topic.

- Take a look around your school: what images are there around the school in posters and pictures, fliers for activities, in the library, and so on? Do these images represent the student body?
- Talk to one of your administrators about the position of the school on diversity and inclusion. Ask about how inclusion and diversity are represented in the budget, calendar, and staffing.
- Take some time to write down what you think the percentages of different groups in the school are; include lots of types of groups—race, class, sexual orientation, nationality/immigrant status, and so on. Once you write down those percentages, ask your administration for the official statistics of the school. Compare the two lists—if you were off-base in some categories, why do you think that is? How might you become more aware of the groups you overlooked?



## Resources to help you plan lessons about the topic.

### Recommended RaceBridges Lesson Plans

Here are a selection of links to lesson plans and resources on this web site that address the topic of creating a climate of welcome in schools.

- 12 Theater Games for Building Bridges and Finding Common Ground
- Including everyone: Small Changes to Create a Welcoming Classroom
- Sticking Together: Sharing our Stories, Our Differences, Our Similarities
- Claim It! Differences and Similarities: Creating a Climate of Inclusion
- Keep the Peace! Preparing for Conflict, Dealing with Anger, and Creating Communities of Harmony
- Finding New Words: A Resources for Addressing Bullying at School
- Seeking Harmony: Starting and Sustaining a Diversity Club for High School Students.

### These stories and lesson plans address the intersection of race and education:

- The Spirit Survives: The American Indian Boarding School Experience
- From Flint Michigan to Your Front Door: Tracing the Roots of Racism
- Nepantla: Caught Between Two Worlds Lesson Plan & audios and videos.
- Connecting The Dots : Racism, Activism & Creating a Life. Lesson Plan & audios & videos.

**Find these lesson plans and teacher resources at: [RaceBridgesStudio.com](https://RaceBridgesStudio.com)**

### Recommended Resources

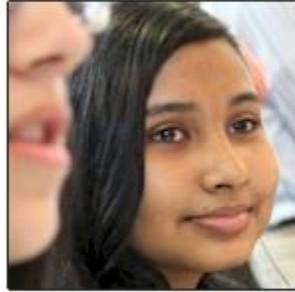
*Resources to help you plan lessons about this topic*

- Kivel, Paul. *Uprooting Racism: How White People can Work for Racial Justice.*
- Lee, Enid, Deborah Menkart, and Margo Okazawa-Rey (eds.). *Beyond Heroes and Holidays: A Practical Guide to K-12 Anti-Racist, Multicultural Education and Staff Development.*
- Loewen, James W. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong.*

# Words to Remember :: A Welcoming School : Improving and Enhancing the Corporate Climate of the school community

Use these quotations at the beginning of the lesson or unit to spark student interest. Try having students respond to them in writing or discuss them in small groups.

Post these quotes around the room and invite your students to discuss them throughout the month.



**If we are to achieve a richer culture, rich in contrasting values, we must recognize the whole gamut of human potentialities, and so we weave a less arbitrary social fabric, one in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place.**

- Margaret Mead

**We all know we are unique individuals, but we tend to see others as representatives of groups**

- Deborah Tannen

**It is never too late to give up your prejudices.**

- Henry David Thoreau

**Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.**

- Leo Tolstoy

# Reflections :: A Welcoming School : Improving and Enhancing the Corporate Climate of the school community

Use these questions to inspire your own thinking and teaching about the topic.

- Do you feel welcome at your school? If so, what makes you feel included? If not, what prevents you from feeling welcomed?
- Who feels left out at your school? How do you know? How might you help change that?
- What role do you think schools should play in diversity education and creating a more just, inclusive society?

