



Inclusive Environments Where All Can Thrive

10 Points School

This action recognizes schools that have implemented efforts to identify, understand, and address the needs of students and parents/guardians who may feel isolated in their current school environment. The ultimate goal is to develop a school climate and culture where all members of the school community feel safe, connected, and where all voices are heard and valued. In order to successfully complete this action, schools will need to be proactive in seeking to understand their school population better and implement approaches to reach out and engage those who are vulnerable in a systemic and sustainable way

Why is it important?

Every New Jersey school community should strive to provide strong and concrete support for all constituents, including those of all different gender identities and expressions, sexual orientations, religions, ethnicity, disability status, English language proficiency, or other characteristic that could lead to them feeling isolated. It is important because in order for everyone to feel safe and supported in school, the culture and climate of the school needs to be inclusive and attuned to the needs of all. All learning and academic performance is impacted by the relative presence or absence of such support. An even more compelling reason to address this issue is the alarming rate of suicide attempts and suicides in adolescents. [According to the Center for Disease Control](#), one in 12 have attempted suicide and one in six high school students report having seriously considered suicide. There is also a growing body of research showing a relationship between bullying and victimization, which happens more frequently to students in vulnerable groups, and the rate of suicide and suicidal ideation.

Unfortunately, there are certain groups of students and parents in New Jersey school communities today who are feeling isolated and/or vulnerable. While there are some groups who are consistently more vulnerable across many school communities, who these groups are in any individual school can vary depending on the demographics of the school and the wider school community. Because of this reality, it is imperative for schools who choose to take on this action to do a comprehensive assessment to identify their vulnerable populations without relying on assumptions and generalities. Further, there are complex dynamics at play in this work. Students and their parents may share a characteristic(s) that make them vulnerable (e.g., socio-economic status), but there also may be divergences where students are vulnerable for different reasons than that of their parents (e.g., students/special education; parents/non-English speakers), and other possible permutations. It is also important for this action that school staff receive professional development around how to create an inclusive environment in their school. The additional benefit of this professional development is the creation of an inclusive climate for staff as well as for students and their parents.

Who should lead and be involved with this action?

Ensuring that the school environment is supportive of all students and parents requires that everyone in that environment is properly educated as to the importance of individual differences. Everyone in the school community must take part including:

- Administration
- Guidance department
- Student Support Services

- Faculty/Staff
- Students
- Parents
- Community

In many schools, there are site-based management teams or other advisory groups that could/should also be involved in ensuring that the school environment is inclusive to all. An obvious home for this effort is the state mandated School Safety and Climate Team.

There are also community resources including organizations devoted to the advocacy of various groups that could/should play a part in creating a supportive climate for all. Schools should partner with these groups as appropriate.

Timeframe

Every school should begin the process by undertaking a systematic effort to identify groups of students and parents who may feel isolated and the supports that may or not be in-place for those groups of students. The overall action may require a shifting of cultural norms in the school/district. If this is the case, this would be a long-term objective. Many schools are already addressing aspects of this action and for them, the timeline may be shorter. Schools should consider taking immediate steps toward addressing this action as appropriate to the situation.

Project Costs and Resources Needed

The primary cost of this action comes in the form of staffing time and funds for professional development and training. There may be additional costs related to the need to address facilities and/or provide opportunities that fill an existing gap in services to these populations.

What to do and how to do it

This section provides guidance and recommendations for implementing the action. A school does not need to follow this guidance exactly as long as it meets the requirements for earning points for this action.

1. Find a home within the school for this task – ideally as part of the school climate team.
2. Obtain approval and endorsement from school and district leadership as needed.
3. Conduct an inventory of activities, programs and practices including identifying what students are being served and what students are underserved (identifying the gaps).
4. Look at school collected data to help identify possibly hidden groups of isolated students and/or parents
5. Conduct focus groups with students (and parents if appropriate) to further clarify the needs of identified groups of students (parents) and what type of support students (parents) would appreciate and benefit from.
6. Create a comprehensive plan for addressing the gaps/needs identified during the inventory and focus groups.
7. Secure any funds required for Professional Development and trainings

Students (and parents if appropriate) should be involved and engaged in all phases of this effort. Schools may wish to partner with outside advocacy organizations, community organizations and agencies which can be an effective approach to providing additional supports and resources when and where appropriate.

Administration, faculty and staff should be made aware of the results of this effort and be sensitive to concerns and needs of these students and parents when planning school programs ranging from assemblies to student activities. (For example: providing an alternate place/activity during lunch period for students who may be fasting for religious reasons.) In addition, it may be necessary to review and revise school/district policies and Code of Conduct as needed to ensure all students are safe and well supported in school. Likewise, building regulations, practices and access to facilities should reflect the rights and needs of all students and staff.

This action requires that schools implement improvement plans that are comprehensive, school-wide, linked to relevant school policy changes, and that are widely communicated to the school community. While some schools have taken steps to support vulnerable groups by creating student clubs/organizations such as a Gay Straight Alliance (or similar)

Club, this is not sufficient to address the requirements of this action. Another example is some schools have an event(s) welcoming immigrant students and families into the school community. Again, this is helpful, but not sufficient to meet the requirements of this action. Establishing and formalizing a communication channel with these families and students, discussing with them what they would find helpful and identifying areas of potential concern, matching students with buddies, creating a club or other vehicle to ensure student's voices are heard and their needs met in the school setting represents a more comprehensive approach to addressing the vulnerabilities of this population.

What to submit to earn points for this action

In order to earn points for this action, the following documentation must be submitted as part of the online certification application in order to verify that the action requirements have been met.

1. Description of Implementation – In the text box provided on the submission page for this action provide a short summary (about 300 words or less) of the efforts the school has undertaken to create an inclusive environment where all can thrive including how the target groups of students and parents were identified and initiatives were undertaken to address their unique needs.
2. Description of the staff professional development training that was undertaken.
3. Upload samples of materials related to the specific initiatives. This could include flyers promoting school-wide events, student-led club activities, outreach efforts, staff training, changes to school practices or policies, etc.

IMPORTANT NOTES: There is a limit of six uploaded documents per action and individual files must not exceed 20 MB. Excerpts of relevant information from large documents are recommended.

All action documentation is available for public viewing after an action is approved. Action submissions should not include any information or documents that are not intended to be viewed by the public.

Resubmission Requirements

To resubmit for this action in subsequent certification applications examples of actions or activities in the current school year should be provided.

Approved Action Expiration Date

Approved actions will expire on August 31st of the application year.

Spotlights: What NJ Schools are Doing

Barclay School, Cherry Hill School District

At Barclay ECC, our program consists of two classroom models; general education and self-contained. The self-contained classroom consists of students who all have an IEP and are here from 9-2:30pm. In the past, those in the self-contained were not always given an opportunity to interact with their general education peers. We felt that this was a disservice to our students and enacted a more favorable approach. We did a complete revision of our schedules so that our speech therapists, general education, and self-contained schedules were in alignment for the inclusion times. In September 2017, letters were distributed to parents of general education students asking for volunteers to become "buddies." By the third week of September, Speech Therapists brought the volunteer "buddies" to the self-contained classrooms for an introductory visit. Once implementation began, all professional staff were asked to look for signs of stress within any of the students and to report any issues that may have a negative impact. In the past, we have hosted events/parties that were gender specific (i.e. "Mother's Day Tea", "Game Night with Dad"). Our school no longer holds such events: all events are gender neutral. Additionally, our school now offers assisted drop off for parents who may find it difficult to walk their children into our building. To view a complete description of the Barclay School Inclusive Environment program click [here](#).

Burnett Middle School, Township of Union Public Schools

Becoming a UCS has changed the lives of students, the school and the community. It's not hard to feel lost in a big school, especially for a middle school student. But students at Burnett Middle School, the largest and most diverse of the

ten schools in the Township of Union Public School District, have the secret to making a big school a warm and welcoming school--become a Unified Champion School.

With over 1,000 students and 90 educators, Burnett is one of the largest middle schools with the most diverse student body in the entire state of New Jersey. And included within these students with many unique differences is a group of about 20 students with different abilities in a multiple disabilities class. Wanting to ensure students were involved and part of the school community and not seen as "those kids" in "that class", at teacher decided to change up the Special Olympics Club she inherited from a volunteer/fundraising club to a Unified Champion School. To ensure she had the support and resources needed to implement the three UCS components, she brought her Principal, Special Services team, Guidance, Physical Education department and Athletic Director together as the UCS School Leadership Team.

The difference between the Special Olympics Club and the Unified Club is that you are bringing the special education and general education students together to build relationships and spread awareness that it is ok to be different. When starting the club the main goal was inclusion, to have every student feel part of the school community. It started by simply inviting a few kids into the classroom once a week, then students started meeting once a month after school and soon, there were over 100 kids wanting to hang out with the special education students during homeroom and join them for lunch and other parts of the day.

In four years the Unified Club has grown has grown from 20 general education students to 150, with more wanting to join. The UCS program now includes daily homeroom meetings, where groups of 25 general education students rotate into the special education classroom to socialize, plan activities and develop their skills as inclusive leaders and ambassadors for inclusion in their school. Unified Club members also meet weekly afterschool for social and Unified sports activities including basketball, Wii sports, bowling, football, volleyball and yoga, and once a month in their Unified PE class. The club's leadership committee organizes the social and Unified sports activities and attends two annual Youth Summits sponsored by Special Olympics New Jersey. Other students are engaged in helping and participating. Throughout the year, the students have fun, but also volunteer and fundraise for important causes in events like the Unified Hoops for Heart fundraiser, where students where 5 Unified teams played basketball and raised \$400.

Each year the Unified Club organizes a Respect/ Spirit Week, an assembly and culminating event, allows the whole school to engage in the message of inclusion. For example: students created lesson plans for homeroom teachers to teach mini lessons about different disabilities, they made posters and created morning announcements for their themed spirit weeks' days. "Camo Day, so we can all blend together in spreading awareness that it is ok to be different." Play Unified provides guest speakers and athletes that can speak to your school to help kick off the spirit week and help spread awareness. Three years later, our students were making their own videos and running the assembly themselves. Students will step up when giving the opportunity to make a difference. Allow all your students to have input and give your ideas. Take pictures, invite the media, get the school photography club involved, invite the ROTC, get as many school clubs involved in your plan so that everyone can have a part in this unified program.

UCS provided our school not just financial support but moral support as we have progressed through implementing this inclusive program within our district. Participating in the UCS programs like the Rutgers Unified Game Day and Youth Summits provided our students the opportunity to see that there was more to life. It allows them to be a part of something bigger. These are life changing experiences both students with and without disabilities. For more information view a program video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VOqLbgLSYw>

Montville Township High School, Montville Township Public Schools

Montville Township High School's Gay Straight Alliance provides a supportive, inclusive environment for students, and a safe space to ask questions and share experiences. Topics of discussion at Gay-Straight Alliance meetings have included practicing means of self-advocacy at school, at home, and in the world, sharing experiences of encountering bias and lack of understanding, discussing current events relevant to students' experiences as part of the LGBT+ community, and sponsoring observances (including Ally Week and Day of Silence). Overall, the Gay-Straight Alliance provides students with a sense of belonging and connectedness – both to each other, and to the school community.

LGBT+ youth need support from faculty, staff, students, and administration as a foundational piece of their future success, both academically and personally. Being a part of the Gay-Straight Alliance helps students to combat

internalized homophobia and transphobia, helping to create a more positive self-image. The Gay-Straight Alliance contributes to creating positive school climate, showing that schools can be a part of social change by ensuring that LGBT+ students' feeling safe and protected is a critical priority for all facets of the school community. This is because doing so models for other students that LGBT+ classmates are their peers, worthy of respect and acceptance.

Words from students themselves illustrate the value of their involvement in the GSA . One student shared that, "GSA is important to me because we can learn from each other about what it means to be happy about ourselves." Another student said that, "GSA means a lot to me because it is important to recognize the anxiety and fear that LGBT kids live with." Other responses include that time spent with the GSA felt like a "relief" and that it can serve as a means to "bring important issues to light."

Protecting LGBT+ students is a way to protect all students because it gives us an opportunity to model humanity, empathy, fairness, and tolerance to the community as a whole – a mission that the Gay-Straight Alliance shares and promotes at Montville Township High School. Now, more than ever, schools and communities must reaffirm their commitment to tolerance and inclusion, especially for LGBT+ students. For more information visit the Montville Township High School's Gay Straight Alliance webpage at <http://www.montville.net/Domain/862>.

Resources

Social Emotional Learning Alliance for New Jersey

A nonprofit alliance offering convenings, shared SEL resources, shared capacity-building resources and technical assistance.

General

Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development, [Creating an Inclusive School, 2nd Edition](#) (ISBN-10: 1416600493, ISBN-13: 9781416600497)

LGBTQ

Minnesota Department of Education, [A Toolkit for Ensuring Safe and Supportive Schools for Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Students](#), September 25, 2017

Special Needs

Special Olympics, New Jersey, [Creating a Unified Club](#)

English Language Learners

U.S. Department of Education, [English Learner Tool Kit for State and Local Education Agencies](#), November 2016

Muslim Youth / Religion

[Muslim Schoolchildren Bullied by Fellow Students, Code Switch Race and Identity, Remixed](#) NPR, March 29, 2017

[Growing Up in a Time of Fear: Confronting Stereotyped About Muslims and Countering Xenophobia, The Learning Network, Teaching and Learning with the New York Times](#), December 17, 2015

U. S. Department of Justice, [Twenty Plus Things Schools Can Do to Respond to or Prevent Hate Incidents Against Arab-Americans, Muslims and Sikhs](#)

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