



Oregon Department of Education | Oregon Health Authority Centering Safety and Belonging for the School Year

Communications Toolkit

August 2023

Dear Education Leaders and Partners,

OHA and ODE co-developed this communications toolkit to support school staff, students and families in their return to school while navigating personal health and safety decisions, including choosing whether or not to wear face coverings. The materials in the toolkit center mental health and well-being, belonging, safety, and respect for choice during this transition. In alignment with [ODE's Integrated Model of Mental Health](#), the goal is to create safe, supportive, welcoming schools, and prevent bullying and harassment linked to student and family choice to wear or not wear a face covering at school.

The start of a new school year is always a time of transition for families and staff. The new school year may bring up feelings like joy, excitement, anticipation, stress, and nervousness. These are perfectly understandable responses to any change in routine and environment and will likely be felt by everyone in the school community in some way.

We invite you to make use of these messages and resources **to initiate conversations and communication with staff, students, families, and your community. It is our responsibility to ensure the school environment is safe and welcoming.** We must ensure that students who most frequently experience bullying, including students who experience disability and those who are Black, Indigenous, Latina/o/x/e, People of Color, Tribal members, and/or are members of the LGBTQ2SIA+ community, feel safe and welcome in their schools. The templates in this toolkit are designed to help schools support students, families, and the school communities in navigating this transition. These customizable messages provide a starting point for school leaders and staff to facilitate conversations about safety and belonging, and to create cultures of care and connection.

If you have any questions about this toolkit or would like additional ideas and thoughts in using some of the communication tools provided in this document, please contact ODE.HealthySchools@ode.oregon.gov.

Key Messages for Educators and School Leaders

It is our responsibility to ensure the school environment is safe and welcoming to every student and staff member. This includes honoring individual decisions around personal safety, including the wearing, or not wearing, of face coverings.

Some students and staff will choose to continue to wear face coverings at school for a variety of reasons. Every individual has the right to make that decision and schools need to support the continued use of face coverings by individuals and create an environment where individual decisions to wear a face covering are honored.

Every person deserves to be treated with fairness, respect, and dignity. Oregon is strong because of its diversity. Differences in culture, religion, ideas, ethnicity, abilities, health decisions, and other forms of identity contribute to the strength and richness of our communities. This includes the choice to wear or not wear a face covering.

We are in this together. When one person in our classroom or community is treated disrespectfully, we all suffer. It is important to support and comfort each other, share accurate and timely public health information, make informed decisions that benefit our communities, and work together, particularly during periods of transition and stress.

Bullying, discrimination, and othering do not belong in schools or communities. Kindness, compassion, empathy, and understanding are the most powerful tools for coping with transitions, stress, and uncertainty. This is the time for our communities to come together, and to unite in the purpose of creating safe, healthy, happy environments for students to thrive.



Tips for Educators to Promote Safe, Inclusive Spaces and Conversations

Be mindful to share only accurate information, and to clearly counter misinformation. Accurate information about people, events, reactions and feelings is empowering. Youth should be provided with factual, age-appropriate information about how to avoid infections and the spread of disease. Explore ways that youth can make decisions about their health and safety.

Understand that many students may be experiencing fear, uncertainty and other feelings during this and other transitional periods. Many students, educators, and their families have been negatively affected by the pandemic, have experienced loss and traumatic stress, and may experience a wide range of feelings.

Make time and space for youth to explore their feelings. Talk with youth about their feelings. Use activities, role-playing, creative/artistic assignments, and discussions to explore their feelings about the events and their feelings about various groups from diverse cultures or lifestyles.



Model compassion, empathy, kindness and acceptance of differences. Youth take their emotional cues from the adults in their lives. Avoid making negative statements about any group.

Use inclusive language and practices and provide explanations for behaviors or values that do not align with school values or policies. Youth can generalize negative statements to students in their classes and community. Appearing suspicious of individuals who think or behave differently, making hostile, hurtful comments and innuendos about individuals or communities, or bullying, cyberbullying, or physically/emotionally threatening or harming others creates a stressful and unsafe learning environment.

Be mindful of your statements and biases, and help youth be aware of their attitudes and biases. This is an opportunity for self-reflection, understanding others, and providing education regarding the nature and impacts of biases. Let students and adults know your expectations of respect for all, and that kindness and compassion are expected and modeled.

Always speak up and take action if you observe discriminatory or unkind comments made by students or staff. Adults have a responsibility to interrupt and safely confront harmful words. This means consistently speaking up every time hurtful words are observed. Inconsistently responding to harmful words sends the message that stigmatizing, othering, and racism are acceptable. Adults can use incidents as an opportunity to explain why a statement is not acceptable, explore how it may be interpreted by others, and offer alternative behaviors and opportunities for reparation.



Stop harassment or bullying immediately. Make it clear that bullying, harassment, and other harmful behaviors in any form (in-person, online, social media, etc.) are unacceptable. Ask questions of the individual exhibiting bullying behavior(s); find out the rationale for their actions. Offer alternative behaviors and additional information/education to help address underlying feelings or concerns.

Counter microaggressions with micro-affirmations. Micro-affirmations are subtle acknowledgements to help individuals feel valued and included. These include acknowledging microaggressions, supporting individuals when they report microaggressions, bullying, discrimination or othering, and directly confronting inequitable, hostile or biased behavior.

Encourage students/youth to seek help. Adults should encourage students/youth (those who bully, those who are bullied, those who witness bullying) to tell a trusted adult or speak out against bullying, harassment or microaggressions (if they feel safe doing so).

Ensure that staff, parents, caregivers, and community members are respected and protected at all times. Students may not be the only individuals at risk of experiencing overt bias or microaggressions from peers or students. Make sure staff and adults know their rights, what an appropriate response may be in the face of such behavior, and how to communicate a concern to school leaders.

Emphasize positive, familiar images of diverse groups. Identify people of numerous ethnicities, religions and/or lifestyles that youth know and who have a positive place in their lives. These could be neighbors, friends, school personnel, healthcare professionals, members of their faith community, or local merchants. Discuss the many characteristics, values, and experiences the youth have in common.

Read books with youth that address prejudice, tolerance, and hate. There are many, many stories appropriate for varying age groups that can help youth think about and define their feelings regarding these issues. Work with your librarian to get recommendations.



Key Messages for Parents, Caregivers, and Families:

We are all responsible for ensuring that school environments are safe and welcoming for every student and staff member. This includes respecting individual decisions around health and safety, including the wearing or not wearing of face coverings.

Every person deserves to be treated with fairness, respect, and dignity.

We are in this together. When one person in our classroom or community is treated disrespectfully, we all suffer. It is important to support and comfort each other.

Share accurate information from reliable sources. Accurate and timely public health information is essential for making informed decisions that benefit our families and communities. It is important to explain what is happening to youth using language that they can understand.

Bullying, discrimination, and othering do not belong in schools or communities. Kindness, compassion, empathy, and understanding are the most powerful tools for coping with transitions, stress, and uncertainty. Our schools are a place where communities can come together and unite in the purpose of creating safe, healthy, happy environments for youth to thrive.



Resources for Educators

Care and Connection: Resources for building strong, positive relationships within schools and in school communities.

Oregon Classroom Wise: Tools to support the mental and emotional well-being of students and school staff.

Every Student Belongs Guidance on the Issue of Bullying

Bullying (and cyberbullying) is unwanted, aggressive behavior involving a real or perceived power imbalance among individuals. The behavior is, or has the potential to be, repeated over time. Individuals who bully use their power— such as physical strength, access to embarrassing information, race or class privilege, or popularity— to control or harm others.

Bullying in school and other settings can often mirror systematic oppression in society at large. Power imbalances can change over time and in different situations, even if they involve the same people. There are negative outcomes for both people who bully and those who are bullied including: challenges with academic achievement, social isolation, and negative physical and mental health outcomes.

In Oregon, there are multiple policies to support students and staff in school settings to both understand and respond to bullying. Focusing on protective factors such as positive peer interactions, social competencies (social and emotional learning), digital citizenship, and sexuality education can significantly reduce bullying behavior.

School Safety & Prevention System: ESD-based School Safety and Prevention Specialists provide equity centered and culturally responsive support to schools and districts in the areas of suicide prevention, intervention and postvention, Behavioral Safety (threat) Assessments, access to the SafeOregon Tip Line, and positive school culture and climate support that includes the prevention of bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, intimidation, and sexual violence.

SafeOregon Tip Line: Program created for Oregon students, families, school staff and community members, and law enforcement officers to report and respond to student safety threats. Tips can be submitted in a variety of ways, including email, phone calls, text, mobile app, or through their web portal.

Oregon Youth Suicide Prevention Programs: Compiled list of youth suicide prevention resources and programming available.

Learning for Justice - Speak up at School: Resources to respond to everyday prejudice, bias, and stereotypes.



Resources for Youth and Families

[Learning for Justice - Speak Up Pocket Card](#): Resources to respond to everyday prejudice, bias, and stereotypes.

[Oregon Student Voice](#): Empowering youth voice in education.

[Stopbullying.gov - Youth Leaders Toolkit](#): Resources for teens to launch a bullying prevention campaign.

[Uplift Youth Era Event](#): Virtual summits are held every few months, check the calendar on the website to see a calendar of upcoming events.

[SafeOregon Tip Line](#): Program created for Oregon students, families, school staff and community members, and law enforcement officers to report and respond to student safety threats. Tips can be submitted in a variety of ways, including email, phone calls, text, mobile app, or through their web portal.

[Oregon Youth Suicide Prevention Programs](#): Compiled list of youth suicide prevention resources and programming available.

Help Lines

- 24-hour National Suicide Prevention Line: 988.
- [Youthline](#) is a teen-to-teen crisis and help line. Call 1-877-968-8491 or text “teen2teen” to 839863.
- 24/7 Crisis Text Line: Text “OREGON” to 741741.
- [The Trevor Project](#) provides information and support to LGBTQ young people. Call 1-866-488-7386 or text “START” to 678-678.

Sample Infographics and Flyers for Posting in Schools



OHA "Masks Welcome Here" flyers for schools

[English – High School](#)

[English – Elementary and Middle School](#)

[OHA "Masks are Welcome Here" sign](#)



OHA Respect My Mask

[English](#)

[Spanish](#)



[CDC Handwashing Resources](#)

- Includes posters, videos, stickers, fact sheets
- Multiple languages available