



Walling Off or Welcoming In?: The Challenge of Creating Inclusive Spaces in Diverse Contexts

READER'S THEATER SCRIPT

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<https://justiceinschools.org>

| Setting | |
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| Jersey City K-8 School (ages 5-14) in the United States | |
| Primary Characters | |
| <p>Narrator</p> <p>Principal Winters (medium role): Principal</p> <p>Rob Lewis (medium role): Social-Emotional Learning coordinator</p> <p>Suzy (medium role): 7th-grade humanities teacher</p> <p>Elena Morales (medium role): 1st-grade teacher</p> | <p>Gregory Timms (large role): Colin's father</p> <p>Madison (medium role): Mother of a 1st-grade student</p> <p>Eddie and Rick (small role): Student</p> <p>Monique (small role): Student</p> <p>Felisa (small role): Student</p> <p>Gordon (small role): Student</p> |

Narrator: Though it was a late weeknight, the monthly meeting of the School Culture Committee (SCC) at The Jersey City K-8 School was pulsing with energy. In light of a recent surge of divisive language among students, the team of teachers, parents, and the principal was eager to finish drafting the SCC's proposed guidelines for strengthening and evaluating school culture. Jersey City's principal, Ms. Winters, opened the meeting by checking in on an incident that had arisen a few weeks before:

Principal Winters: How has it been going with Danielle and her friends? Are they still ostracizing Danielle because of her family's support for Trump? Or are their Tuesday lunches with you helping, Rob?

Narrator: Rob, the school's Social-Emotional Learning Coordinator, offered an update:

Rob: I've been inspired by their willingness to be honest with each other, but it is going to take a lot more time and work for their friendships to be repaired. Danielle's friends—especially but not only her friends of color—just aren't able to reconcile the fact that she says positive things about Trump. Teresa, in particular,

still can't forgive Danielle for making that comment about 'criminal illegals' given what she knows about Teresa's cousin. And Danielle is just so hurt that her friends are holding her political views against her. They are all taking these statements very personally.

Narrator: Gregory Timms, a 7th grade father, jumped in.

Gregory: It's hard not to take it personally! White students are the minority at this school, but they are treated like they are the unjustly privileged majority. Colin told me at dinner last night that there are kids in his class who won't work with him just because they know our family voted for Trump. He wants to switch schools, but we can't afford to move to a whiter district or send him to a private school.

Narrator: Suzy, Colin's humanities teacher, looked concerned.

Suzy: Well, we love Colin and hope he won't switch schools! I think the problem is that many of Trump's statements are emotionally damaging to many of our students. They lack coping strategies.

Narrator: Madison, a mother of a first-grade student, agreed with Suzy:

Madison: Right! How are they supposed to react when they hear their classmates insinuating that they don't even belong in this country? I believe in zero tolerance for bullying. That's the point of this committee, to make sure that JC K-8 has a culture we can be proud of, where no child is bullied or harassed. But in these instances, I feel like our kids are having to set boundaries because the school isn't doing it for them.

Narrator: Principal Winters was more cautious:

Principal Winters: I agree our committee needs to set those boundaries more clearly, but I worry about characterizing these disputes automatically as bullying or harassment. You know that by state law, we are mandated reporters for all incidents of bullying or harassment. I don't think that we should be reporting and punishing Danielle, Teresa, or Colin's classmates; we should be teaching them how to work together and get along. Do we really want to criminalize what should be teachable moments?

Narrator: Madison responded, followed by Rob:

Madison: But we have anti-bullying laws for a reason, and we can't overlook the harm that treating bullying or harassment as teachable moments could have on kids being bullied, especially those from marginalized groups. That would do everything but create a safe space for students to learn.

Rob: You faced a version of this 'teachable moment' question in your class last week, didn't you, Elena?

Elena Morales: We were in the block room, and a small group of boys began building a wall that spanned the width of the classroom. At first, I thought nothing of it, but then they started chanting, "*Build the wall! Build the wall!*"

Narrator: Madison looked appalled.

Madison: No, they did not---How am I going to discuss this with Marquis tonight? And just before bedtime...

Elena: I could see that some of my students were feeling uncomfortable, and I immediately called a timeout. Normally, I don't interfere with the children's play. They need the freedom to explore, problem-solve, and negotiate differences on their own. But this time, something felt different. I just couldn't sit back and watch! I asked them, "*What are you boys working on, hmmm?*" Eddie and Rick responded.

Eddie and Rick: We're building the wall to keep the Mexicans out!

Elena: They were so excited and proud of their work.

Narrator: Suzy, who had been wrestling with similar incidents in her 7th grade humanities class, could barely contain herself.

Suzy: What did you do?!

Elena: I was so angry I had to pause for a few seconds and just breathe deeply. Then I thought maybe I'd just redirect them to a different activity—say, bring out the paints instead? 'Cause after all, they don't know the hate behind what they're saying. But then I felt like, you know what? They're in my class now! I'm their teacher. It is MY RESPONSIBILITY to educate them, and help them understand that we should embrace others rather than fear them.

So, in front of the whole class, I posed the question: "*Why do some people want to*

keep other people out?” And the kids had so many interesting comments.

Narrator: Elena went on to share what Monique, Felisa, and Gordon had said.

Monique: Sometimes you just want to be alone or with your best friends, and so you have to say no to some people.

Felisa: You might keep people out because you have to stay safe, and you don't know if strangers could be dangerous.

Gordon: Because the Mexicans will take our jobs!

Elena: I turned to Gordon and I asked him, *“What is your job?”* He looked at me with wide eyes and shrugged his shoulders. I quietly said to my class, *“Your job, boys and girls, is to come to school to learn. And while you are at school, your job is to be kind, to be caring, and to be respectful so that everyone has a safe learning space. Do you think anyone can stop you from being kind, caring, and respectful?”* And they all said, *“Nooooooooooooo!”* So I said, *“Then nobody can take your job!”*

Narrator: A long moment of silence followed as people processed Elena's story. Finally, Madison spoke, followed immediately by an impassioned Gregory.

Madison: Thank you, Ms. Morales. You are teaching our children what really counts in life. To be kind to each other and to think about their actions. You didn't shame the boys, or talk about politics. You just guided them toward their better selves. I know I speak for the families of all of the marginalized children in your classroom when I say, thank you.

Gregory: Don't any of you see what is wrong here? Those boys were play-acting the policies of the President of the United States, and their public school teacher (a state employee, no less) leveraged her personal, moral and political reasoning to stop them. That was a partisan move, through and through. The boys were creatively engineering a wall, and they were drawing on their knowledge of current events in the process! That should have been celebrated by the teacher, but instead their entire innovation was discouraged. If you wanted to make it a teachable moment, Ms. Morales, you could have taken the time to explain to them the difference between legal and illegal immigration. That would have been a good lesson!

Narrator: Principal Winters broke the silence that followed.

Principal Winters: Gregory has a point, everyone. We can't censor student play or creativity just because it happens to disagree with our politics. As I've said before, school needs to be a neutral space, a politics-free zone.

Narrator: A flurry of responses followed, from Rob, Suzy, Gregory, and Madison.

Rob: With all due respect, how can school be a politics-free zone? What happened in Elena's classroom, and with Colin, Danielle, and Teresa, shows us that politics will enter the school whether we plan for it or not. That's why we set up this committee, right?

Suzy: I totally agree. The purpose of school is to prepare students to be citizens in a democracy. How can we prepare future citizens if we cannot talk about politics? We need to lean into these conversations, not back away.

Gregory: If we're going to 'lean in' to politics, let's have our kids study the First Amendment! You can't censor something just because it doesn't agree with you. That's a freedom we fight for all around the world.

Madison: But these are kids in school. Adults can walk away from offensive statements or people, but our children can't go anywhere.

Narrator: Principal Winters finally felt as if she had found her footing again.

Principal Winters: Madison is right, students don't have total freedom of speech. We have to be mindful of our state and federal bullying laws. We can't ignore statements and incidents that create a hostile learning environment and inhibit students' learning, especially since attendance is mandatory.

Elena: She's exactly right. Free speech doesn't mean that schools shouldn't teach children how to be kind to one another! Maybe it's my 'liberal bias,' but I'm not going to stop teaching inclusion and social-emotional skills just because our national political discourse has lowered the bar below civility.

Narrator: This didn't sit well with Gregory.

Gregory: I'm all for teaching kindness. Just don't confuse kindness with political ideology. Democrats don't have a monopoly on good character. Not to mention that your 'inclusiveness' seems to stop where conservative perspectives begin. Those Shepard Fairey posters showing everyone except a white male as part of 'We the People?' They're obviously anti-Trump. Let me tell you, Colin notices that

his views and people that hold them aren't welcome.

Narrator: Suzy was baffled.

Suzy: I hardly think that posters featuring women of color saying things like 'We the People protect each other' and 'We the People defend dignity' are inappropriate. They're simply inclusive. The posters are meant to show all students that we value them as people, and that we'll work together to create an inclusive classroom in which everyone's needs and rights are respected.

Narrator: Gregory was skeptical.

Gregory: Would you be equally happy to put up a poster of a white man standing up for our second amendment rights?

Narrator: Before Suzy could respond, Rob intervened.

Rob: These are great conversations, but not ones we can resolve in the few minutes we have left tonight. I'm wondering where we stand more generally. Do we have any principles or policies we can agree will improve school culture while respecting student diversity, including political diversity?

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