



# School Sports and Bias:

Best Practices and Resources for  
Athletic Directors, Coaches, and  
School Administrators



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Athletic directors, coaches and school administrators play vital roles in creating a sports environment where all student-athletes can feel included and thrive. Cultivating an equitable and inclusive team, arena, and school community requires ensuring that historically marginalized students feel welcome and safe, and values of fair play and respect are upheld by all.

This toolkit is a resource to help athletic directors, coaches, and school administrators strengthen their responses to sports-based incidents of bias and bigotry. Whether it be a racist “joke,” slur, stereotype, act of exclusion or some other manifestation of implicit or explicit bias, all school community members must be committed to addressing bias-related incidents in the sports arena. This is in large part because standing idly by in the face of a bias-related incident can have a lasting impact. Failing to effectively respond to bias incidents tacitly condones harmful words and actions and sends a message that school safety and equity are not community priorities. By addressing and confronting harmful language and behaviors, athletic directors, coaches, and other school staff can actively promote greater safety, inclusion, and equity on and off the playing field and model how student-athletes can do the same.



In this toolkit, you will find ADL’s “P.E.A.C.E.” framework to guide you in proactively preparing for and responding to hate and bias-related incidents. This guide also provides examples of sports-related bias incidents with appropriate discussion questions for learning.

The most effective responses to bias incidents incorporate prevention, intervention, and long-term education. The work to build inclusive athletic spaces cannot begin after an incident has occurred. A commitment to continuous anti-bias learning is essential before, during and after an incident.

This toolkit is not a substitute for legal advice. Any protocols, policies, or procedures that are developed or updated should be reviewed according to your school’s or district’s approval process.

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# P.E.A.C.E. Framework: Developing Your School's Incident Response Strategy

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ADL has developed the P.E.A.C.E. framework as an acronym to use when preparing for and responding to school-based hate and bias incidents. This framework is as applicable to the athletic arena as it is to the classroom, cafeteria, cyberspace and all other areas of student life.

## What is a Bias Incident?

A bias incident often involves noncriminal conduct motivated by hatred, prejudice or bigotry and directed toward any individual, residence, house of worship, institution or business expressly because of the target's real or perceived race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, disability or other aspects of identity. Bias incidents can involve biased or hateful imagery, language or actions.



### Before responding to a bias incident, consider the following:

- **Everyone has bias.** Be aware of how bias (your own and others') may affect perceptions and actions.
- **No two incidents are exactly alike.** Approach each case individually.
- **Dig deep. Incidents can be indicators of other problems with school or team culture.** Take time to assess the whole picture to address the root of the problem.
- **Get out in front or risk being left behind.** In the immediate aftermath of an incident, make your response a priority, and take all the key stakeholders of your school (e.g., students, families, staff, community) into account.
- **Model inclusivity.** Make sure your policies, personnel and pedagogy all reflect the values you want your students to exhibit.
- **Practice.** Regularly practice and refine your bias incident response protocol.

# Prevent and Prepare

Sports-based bias incidents can be carried out by spectators, including students and family members, and witnessed by others. Therefore, it is critically important to educate the entire school community to recognize and address bias. The educational process should occur throughout the school year in schoolwide discussions and pre-season team meetings. Towards the end of this guide are examples of bias incidents in the athletic arena that can be introduced at pre-season team meetings in order to engage in discussions on the nature and impact of bias incidents, and on intervention and prevention strategies. Preparation is key to prevention. **To actively prevent incidents, continuously assess your team's culture and the broader school environment. Below are some questions you may want to reflect on throughout the school year.**

- Does your district's administrative leadership team include the athletic director?
- Does the leadership team participate in professional development on bias incident prevention and intervention?
- Do all new and current coaches participate in anti-bias training and are they informed about the district's bias prevention and intervention policies, protocols, and practices?
- Do ALL your sports teams actively discuss the possibility of bias incidents that may occur from teammates, spectators, opposing teams, and others in the school and greater community? Are coaches, athletic directors, and student-athletes equipped to respond?
- Is there a committee of students, family members and staff working on diversity, equity and inclusion goals throughout the school year?
- Are you providing anti-bias and anti-racism training for coaches, teachers and staff, including on topics such as microaggressions, implicit bias, stereotypes, inclusive language, responding to insensitive comments, cyberbullying, online hate, etc.?
- Are your physical and virtual spaces accessible to all? Does your school consider accessibility needs on an ongoing or regular basis?
- Have you considered which identities are represented on your school signage, posters and photographs? Do they reflect the inclusive community you are trying to build?
- Have you conducted a school climate survey and reviewed the results with your school community and staff? Have you taken action, if necessary, in response to the results?



**Having clear policies and protocols to follow when an incident occurs will make your response swift and effective. Consider the following questions in your planning.**

### **School Policies**

- Have you reviewed and updated your policies on bullying, harassment and discrimination?
- Are these policies inclusive of all students?
- Are these policies equitably enforced? Do your policies address incidents that take place in digital spaces?
- Have you reviewed and updated your policies in your staff and student handbooks?
- Have you publicized these policies to all members of the school community using many different methods of communication (e.g., on notice boards, in digital and print newsletters)?
- Are your school policies available in many different languages?
- Is your data collection protocol consistent with local, state and federal standards? It is important to track and analyze incidents so that patterns can be addressed.

### **Response Protocol**

- Does your school have a bias incident response protocol? Consider creating a readily available incident response checklist to use when incidents occur.
- Has the protocol been clearly communicated to school staff? Practicing and refining the protocol will make your team more efficient and thorough in their response when incidents do occur.
- Do your coaches and team members understand the roles they may be asked to play in connection with incident response (e.g., investigation, communication, community healing, etc.)?
- Do you have relationships with community-based organizations, your local human rights commission and other relevant stakeholders? These relationships can enhance your ability to respond rapidly and comprehensively to an incident.
- Do you have a standardized bias-incident response form to guide and document information-gathering after an incident?
- Have you clarified what role (if any) school resource officers (SROs) play in your school, including sporting events?



## Encourage Reporting

**Young people are often very reluctant to tell adults about incidents because they believe reporting may make things worse.**

- Are you fostering a culture where students feel safe and supported to report and discuss bias incidents with school staff?
- Do students know what to do when a bias incident occurs? Are there trusted adults in the building to whom they can turn for help?
- Do you have an easily accessible reporting mechanism?
- Is your reporting mechanism safe, confidential and anonymous? Schools must ensure that students who report incidents do not experience retaliation or unnecessary interaction with law enforcement.
- Is the reporting system accessible to people with disabilities? Is it safe and comfortable for historically marginalized students, students who are immigrants and students learning English as a new language? Ensuring safety and inclusion for vulnerable, under-represented and marginalized students will encourage reporting.
- Have you affirmed that your school is a “safe zone” by reinforcing existing laws, policies and constitutional rights that protect immigrant students from federal immigration enforcement activity at school?
- Do all staff know what to do when they encounter a bias incident or a bias incident is reported to them? Is there clarity among the staff with respect to who reviews and investigates these reports? Take reported issues seriously, invest the time to listen before engaging in problem-solving and maintain confidentiality when possible.
- Do coaches and athletic directors reinforce how to report incidents and are they working to make themselves more accessible to students so they feel comfortable reporting?
- You may notice an initial increase in reported incidents when you begin to implement some of the suggestions listed above. This may reflect an increased trust between the school administration and the students.



# Act Quickly and Respond

**Every bias incident should be addressed in the moment when possible and in a serious manner to reassure the school community that hateful, biased language and actions are unacceptable. Understand that the impact of an incident on your school community—and therefore your response—will vary based on the type of bias or hate and the method of dissemination.**

## **Intervene in the Moment**

- Responding to biased language and incidents conveys important messages about a school's culture and values. Effective responses communicate that your school community is committed to protecting historically marginalized people, whether they are widely represented in your school community or not.
- Comments and actions motivated by bias can sometimes catch us off guard, making it hard to know what to say or do in the moment. Remember that silence is harmful. By not intervening, bystanders are communicating that the biased language or actions are acceptable. In responding to bias incidents, allies communicate care by holding those who cause harm accountable, showing solidarity and support for those who are targeted or harmed, modeling and encouraging ally behaviors, and educating the broader school community.
- Being prepared to STOP the biased behavior and SUPPORT the targeted individual or group will allow you, as educators and leaders, to respond more intentionally and with confidence. In responding, we communicate care by holding those who cause harm accountable, showing solidarity and support for those who are targeted or harmed, modeling and encouraging ally behaviors, and educating the broader school community.
- **When an incident occurs before, during, or after an athletic event, you must STOP the behavior in the moment and SUPPORT the targeted student(s) or group(s).**

## **Support Targeted Individuals and Groups In the Immediate Aftermath of a Bias Incident**

Make sure all students are safe.

It is critical that coaches, athletic directors, and other administrators, as well as teachers and counselors, provide support for any student or group who has been targeted. Providing support might look different depending on the incident. Be cautious not to put targeted students in a position that is embarrassing; some students who may need support might say they are okay because they want to avoid further marginalization. **Be sure to remain flexible in providing support and check in often.**

### **What support can look like:**

- After stopping the incident, find a quiet moment to speak to the impacted student one-on-one.
- Ask if the student is okay.
- State that you value and respect them and that this type of behavior is unacceptable and will be addressed.
- Ask how you can support the student or what the student needs.
- If the student has a positive relationship with another adult in the school, you may want to encourage them to discuss the incident with them. Keep in mind that students process bias incidents in different ways and that students' reactions should be respected.

### **Here are some ways you can offer to help:**

- Encourage the student to report the incident to a trusted adult.  
*(Note: If a student expresses that they do not wish to report the incident to the administration, educators should let the student know that educators have a responsibility to report incident to the administration in order to keep them safe. Assure the student that you will keep them informed of the process so that there is transparency.)*
- If your school has an identity-based organized club or affinity group for students, suggest that the student reach out to process their feelings with other members of the club or group.
- Encourage the student to talk to parents, caregivers or family members about providing support at home, and offer to connect families to the appropriate school staff if they would like to speak about the school's response to the incident.
- Provide comfort and aid to students who were targeted and impacted. Provide space for them to process their emotions. Ensure that they are heard and seen.
- Be mindful that if the targeted student is part of a marginalized group in schools, others who identify in that way may also feel unsafe and vulnerable. Find ways to communicate to the larger community.
- Determine the extent to which mental health, social service providers and other victim resources should be consulted.
- Consider the bigger picture at the school. Ask students whether similar incidents have happened and listen to concerns and feedback about school climate.
- Protect confidentiality and the rights of all involved parties, including the student(s) allegedly responsible for the bias incident.



## Questions to Consider

- Who needs to be included in the response to this incident? Do staff, families, community organizations, media or others need to be involved from the onset?
- Who is reaching out to those who are impacted, and how? Think about the roles that administrators, educators and support staff can play with respect to outreach.
- How will you ensure that those who are impacted feel safe and that their needs are addressed?
- How will you ensure transparency about the investigation without compromising confidentiality and safety?
- Do some or all of the involved parties belong to another school community? How are you communicating with them? ***When incidents take place in the athletic arena or other venues where two schools interact, consider how you are communicating and coordinating with the other school's administration.***
- Does the incident involve an imminent threat to student safety or the safety of others? If so, consider whether school safety resources may need to be activated.

## Initiate an Investigation

- Use a standardized bias incident reporting form to gather information and preserve evidence. Interview everyone involved separately and collect written accounts as soon as possible.
- Investigate all allegations of bias incidents swiftly, thoroughly and seriously.



## What to Do if the Aggressor is Unknown

Responding to bias incidents can become extremely complex if the aggressor is unknown. Consider providing education to the broader impacted group in these moments and facilitating group conversations to explain and explore historical and current bias. However, avoid framing the response as punitive or burdensome. Students should not view anti-bias education as a chore but rather as an important and integral part of their learning and development. Reaffirm your school's values and provide support to students on an individual or group basis. Remember that **bias causes harm when there is no identifiable target or aggressor.**

Ensure the consequences you are considering are equitable; a disproportionate or poorly communicated response can perpetuate and solidify biases.

### Concepts to Remember When Responding to Incidents

Prioritize impact, not intent.

Young people will often say that their words or actions were not intended to cause harm. It is important for educators and leaders to refocus the conversation from intent to impact. We recommend explaining how, for the person targeted, the harm and impact of the biased action is what matters, not necessarily the intent behind it. You may choose to ask the aggressor to reflect on these questions: **“How do you think that action or comment made the target feel?”** and **“How do you think people from the targeted community are impacted when that language is used?”**



# Communicate

**Prompt, intentional and specific communication with the school community makes a big difference. Statements from school leadership set the tone for the community.**

- Determine who in the school community needs to be informed. A bias incident that occurs in the athletic arena can be far reaching and impact the school community and community at large. Remember, word will get out and travel quickly. It is important that a community hears from the school administration first. Otherwise, they may assume administrators are not taking the incident seriously.
- Initial communications should be timely and do the following:
  1. Describe the nature of the incident (e.g., “swastika on the bathroom wall”). Be transparent and specific. If slurs or offensive language were used, make sure to use censored words (for example, n-word, r-word) so that you do not perpetuate the harm.
  2. Use thoughtful, inclusive language, and choose terms that respect how affected communities self-identify.
  3. Denounce the incident and reaffirm your school’s values.
  4. When appropriate, announce an immediate investigation of the incident.
  5. When ready, present a clear plan of action moving forward. Are you hosting conversations in classrooms? Are you planning a schoolwide program? What steps are you going to take to help the school community heal?
  6. Share resources that will help the school community continue these conversations outside of the school setting.
  7. Protect the identities and rights of the students involved.
- Tone matters. Use this opportunity to convey that bias will not be tolerated and to build trust with the school community.
- You may choose to tailor your message depending on the audience (e.g., students, staff, families and the wider community).
- Send regular updates and plans for short- and long-term actions to various stakeholders.

If the media is involved, make sure to clarify who is charged with responding.





## Educate and Heal

**Make sure you are teaching students about bias, its harmful effects and how to challenge it throughout the school year. Don't wait for an incident to occur to talk about these important issues.**

### Teachable Moments

- Provide opportunities for all members of the school community to discuss and process their thoughts and feelings about the incident and bias more generally. Remember to center the perspectives of impacted communities if it is safe, respectful and appropriate to do so—otherwise, you may risk retargeting affected individuals and communities.
- Educators, counselors and administrators should coordinate disciplinary, behavioral and educational interventions for students responsible for the bias incident.
- Turn bias-motivated incidents into teachable moments for aggressors, bystanders and the wider school community by using the next section in this guide. Beyond administering consequences, schools have a responsibility to educate the students who perpetrate bias incidents.

### Help young people accept discomfort and uncertainty.

A safe environment doesn't mean you and your student-athletes will or should be comfortable with every discussion. Be prepared for conversations about bias to be messy and complicated. They may not end as you expect they will. You can remind yourself of this and share that understanding with your students to manage everyone's expectations. It is helpful to remember and share with students that deep learning, the kind that is lasting and long-term, often comes when things are uncomfortable or "sticky." It may also be helpful to explain to students that when complex conflicts are handled well, there can be a greater understanding and improved relationships on the other side.

## Revisit conversations if they don't go as planned.

It is important to circle back to any conversations that don't go as planned or which feel unfinished. Educating young people about the impact of bias is an ongoing process that will require multiple conversations. While you might not have the words to respond perfectly to every situation, you do have a responsibility to say something that interrupts any harm being caused. You might consider simply stating, "What I just heard/saw was not okay." You can then follow up later after collecting your thoughts and planning for what might be a complex conversation to navigate.



## Community Healing

- Include many perspectives in the conversation about how to heal the school community. Responding to hate can be a community-building opportunity if you encourage collaboration.
- If appropriate for your school community, hold a town hall, vigil, assembly or school community gathering. These events can help convey information, elevate ally voices and personal stories and provide an open forum for the community.
- Be careful not to tokenize marginalized voices by asking members of an affected group to represent their community or culture.
- Responding to incidents should not be a "one-and-done" approach. Anti-bias education is a long-term process, and preventing bias requires an ongoing commitment from all stakeholders in the school community, including the school's administrators. Integrate anti-bias and bullying prevention strategies into the school curriculum, school climate programs and family engagement efforts.
- Continue to provide professional development for school staff on how to lead discussions on the nature and impact of bias with students and families.

## Assess and Adjust

- After each incident, convene the staff for a debriefing.
- Review and update policies and protocols based on lessons learned.
- Continue to regularly drill bias incident response with your staff.
- Review your bias incident prevention and intervention programs to ensure anti-bias education throughout the year.

# Sports-Specific Bias Prevention Strategies

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Just as schools expect staff, students and their families to uphold positive community values such as respect, inclusion and equity in the classroom and other places within the school building, as well as in cyberspace, schools sometimes fall short of ensuring these same values are upheld in sports. The following strategies are designed to help uphold positive community values in the athletic arena, prevent bias incidents from happening there in the first place, and provide guidance on how to respond when an incident happens.

## Pre-Season Team Meetings

Pre-season team meetings play a critical role in communicating the values that students are expected to uphold, and in establishing a shared commitment to treat each other and opposing players with respect and equity—on and off the playing field. Explain what respect, inclusion and equity mean in the context of sports, eliciting from students and sharing your own perspective and examples. These meetings should be held prior to EACH season: fall, winter, spring. All student athletes should be required to attend pre-season meetings as a prerequisite to participate in interscholastic athletics. All meetings should be led by coaches and team captains, and include the following topics.

## Brave and Safe Space Guidelines

At the beginning of pre-season meetings, coaches and team captains should lead a discussion on safe and brave space guidelines that will help students feel they can contribute to the meeting and have their voices heard. Interpretations of the word “safety” may depend on the person. Sometimes members of majority and/or power groups equate safety with comfort and will suggest guidelines such as “politeness,” “positivity,” and “cheerfulness.” While those guidelines might be aspirational, they can inhibit members of marginalized groups from expressing strong feelings as well as real and sometimes harsh testimony about their experiences, including those of feeling unsafe, marginalized and targeted. Refocusing guidelines around a “brave space” allows everyone to share their feelings and experiences and to also challenge themselves to speak with candor. Brave is defined as: “To have or show physical, emotional or moral strength in the face of difficulty, danger or fear.”



One approach is to engage students, either in small groups or a large group, in identifying at least two or three words that will help create a safe and brave space for all and that begin with each of the following letters, "SPORTS!" (or use the particular sport of the team or group). Sample words include "Sensitivity," "Productivity," "Openness," "Respect," "Trust," and "Supportive." The exclamation mark can be used to identify words that begin with any letter in the alphabet. The guidelines should be recorded on chart paper, much like a game plan, and referenced throughout the season by coaches and team captains as a reminder at the beginning of every team meeting.

### **Community Values and Fair Play**

Pre-season team meetings should include a discussion on community values that students and adults are expected to uphold on and off the playing field. Examples of community values include accountability (individual and group), communication, respect for oneself and for others, inclusion, and responsibility. These and any other community values should be discussed in the context of fair play. Questions to consider include the following:

- Why are community values important?
- What do we convey about our values through our words and actions?
- Why is it important for team members and adults to uphold the community's values?
- In what ways are community values and fair play connected?
- What challenges might students and adults encounter in upholding community values and fair play and what can students and adults do to address the challenges? (Examples of challenges include peer pressure, social media, trash talk, poor role modeling by professional athletes, etc.).

### **Consequences for Engaging in Bias Incidents**

Consequences for engaging in bias incidents directed at one's own team members and/or members of an opposing team must be established and clearly communicated to all athletes prior to a sports season (see also section, "Prevent and Prepare"). Consequences for retaliating against individuals who intervene during an incident should also be established and clearly communicated.

The community values, expectations to uphold them, and consequences for student behaviors that are inconsistent with and/or undermine community values and fair play should be presented and clearly communicated in writing, potentially in a contract that everyone is required to sign.





## Responsibility to Report Bias Incidents

In keeping with community values and fair play, all students and adults have a responsibility to hold themselves and each other accountable and to report bias incidents by teammates, opposing players, coaches, referees, and spectators.

It's important to acknowledge and discuss why some students may feel reluctant to report an incident. If the bias has come from a peer in the dominant/majority group, or from an adult, students might feel intimidated and unsafe. Also, some students may not feel they have a trusted adult to whom they can report the incident.

A school or district process for reporting an incident during and/or after an athletic event should be pre-established and communicated to students during the pre-season meeting (see also previous section, "Encourage Reporting").

## Turning Bias Incidents into Teachable Moments

In order to have lasting impact, the response to a bias-related incident should go beyond intervening in the moment. The incidents have the potential for deeper understanding and valuable learning for those involved. When students and adults get "caught" saying or doing something offensive, biased and inappropriate, they are usually able to acknowledge the disparity between their words and actions and the community values. However, that doesn't mean learning, empathy or healing has taken place. We want to help students and adults understand how and why the many ways that bias is harmful and consequential. We then want to provide them with skills and encourage them to make different choices in the future. It is never too late for both students and adults to learn.



# Turning Bias Incidents into Teachable Moments: A Guide to Facilitate Deeper Learning

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This section provides examples of bias incidents that can be discussed during pre-season meetings to illustrate some of the ways in which incidents occur on and off the playing field, along with specific response strategies to address an incident in the moment, followed by education to turn the incident into a learning opportunity.

Procedure:

1. After introducing the scenario, divide students into small groups, invite them to discuss the small group questions and identify a group member who will share a summary of their discussion with everyone afterwards. Following the small group discussions, reconvene everyone and encourage each group to share a summary of their discussion without attributing any of the information to a specific member of their group.
2. Following the small group reporting, share the contextual significance section with students and present the large group discussion questions.

**Scenario 1:** Prior to the new school year, several members of Team A communicate on social media anti-LGBTQ+ slurs to members of Team B whom Team A will be playing at the first game of the season. When their behavior is questioned by the coach, the members of Team A say, “it’s just trash talk,” “everybody does it,” “it’s how you get in the heads of your opponents,” or “it happened before the school year started.”

## Small Group Discussion Questions:

1. Have you heard anti-LGBTQ+ slurs online or in person? If so, how did you feel when you heard them?
2. Why do you think some people direct anti-LGBTQ+ slurs at other people?
3. How do you think anti-LGBTQ+ slurs impact people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer or transgender? How do you think the slurs impact your school community?

## Background Information and Context

Language has the power to promote and reinforce systems of bias and discrimination, as well as to challenge those systems. Anti-LGBTQ+ slurs send harmful messages about people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer and transgender.

While some people might dismiss the seriousness of anti-LGBTQ+ slurs, it's important to acknowledge a larger context of mistreatment and discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community. In many communities and families in the U.S., people who are LGBTQ+ are forced to hide their identities in order to be physically and psychologically safe. LGBTQ+ youth represent almost 40 percent of homeless youth in the U.S. due to family rejection and are much more likely to report high levels of depression. Research from the [Trevor Project's 2022 national survey](#) on LGBTQ youth mental health found that 50% of LGBTQ teens ages 13-17 considered attempting suicide in the past year and 18% attempted suicide—twice the rate of suicide attempts among all U.S. teens.

The belief that there is something wrong, abnormal or shameful about being a member of the LGBTQ+ community has led to an extremely damaging practice called conversion therapy. This dangerous practice uses a series of physically and emotionally painful activities, with the goal of creating a negative association with being LGBTQ+. It is estimated that more than 700,000 LGBTQ+ people have been forced into this abusive practice, and tens of thousands will be in the future. To date, 20 states have banned conversion therapy, but there is no federal law forbidding this practice.

In addition to conversion therapy, there are [laws](#) that uphold the system of anti-LGBTQ+ bigotry, including those that ban transgender athletes in schools. It wasn't until 2015 that marriage equality became the law of the land in all 50 states. Several states continue to have marriage equality bans written into their laws, showing a resistance to equity in these communities across the country. LGBTQ+ people disproportionately face challenges in adopting children, receiving necessary healthcare, obtaining employment and accessing other fundamental resources. Globally, it remains illegal to be LGBTQ+ in 71 countries throughout the world, punishable by jail or worse.

In the sports world, anti-LGBTQ+ language and actions are more intense given the greater emphasis on and expectations of male athletes than female athletes and the ways in which stereotypes of female athletes are perpetuated and reinforced by anti-LGBTQ+ bias.

The short- and long-term impacts of anti-LGBTQ+ slurs are harmful whether LGBTQ+ people are present to hear that language or not. When spectators at a sporting event direct anti-LGBTQ+ slurs at a student athlete, the slurs dehumanize everyone simply because of who they are and undermine the respect and dignity that every human being deserves (see GLSEN's [Changing the Game](#), "a groundbreaking program that started in 2011 to give resources for educators and students to ensure that physical education classes and athletics are inclusive for LGBTQ+ individuals)."

### **Large Group Discussion Questions:**

1. Is “trash talk” harmful? Why or why not? What about “trash talk” that targets a particular identity group, like the LGBTQ+ community?
2. Does it matter that the anti-LGBTQ+ slurs were communicated prior the start of the school year? Why or why not?
3. Have you heard anti-LGBTQ+ slurs in the athletic arena before, during, or after a game by a member of your school community or the opposing school community? How did you feel when you heard it? If so, did you (or someone else) respond, and if so, how?
4. In the future, how might you respond based on what you have just learned?

**Scenario 2:** During practice, a coach tells a Jewish student to “run as if your life depends on it, or you’ll end up in the oven.”

### **Small Group Discussion Questions:**

1. What is the remark, “you’ll end up in the oven,” referencing? How did you feel when you listened to the scenario?
2. How do you think the coach’s remark impacted the Jewish student to whom it was directed?
3. How might the coach’s remark impact the team? How might the comment impact the team differently depending on whether the Jewish student is the only one or one of very few Jewish students on the team? How might the coach’s remark impact the school community?

## Background Information and Context

It is not uncommon for people to use or connect Holocaust references, comparisons and so-called “jokes” to contemporary situations. This appropriation is disrespectful to the millions of people, including approximately six million Jews, who were systematically murdered during the Holocaust, and to the survivors and their descendants, and the Jewish community in general, by minimizing and trivializing the genocidal atrocities and their short and long-term impacts. It also sends a clear message about who is deserving of respect by communicating biased ideas about a person or group based on identity. It also communicates that this biased idea is not harmful because “it’s just a joke.” In reality, biased humor makes bias and bigotry seem more acceptable and normalizes oppression against targeted groups.

One example of this kind of prejudicial humor is jokes about the Holocaust. During the Holocaust, millions of people were murdered, including approximately six million Jews—about two thirds of the European Jewish population at the time. After gaining power over the German government in 1933, the Nazis aimed to create a German society based on racial “purity” that was free from people considered to be “undesirable.” These “undesirable” groups included Jews, people with disabilities, members of the LGBTQ+ community and various ethnic, religious and political minorities. Nazi ideology included the belief that Jews were to blame for Germany’s economic problems. This ideology also encouraged people to believe that problems like unemployment and hunger would continue until all people not belonging to the “master race” were driven out of Germany or killed.

While we often think of the Holocaust as part of a far-off past, Holocaust survivors who directly experienced the Nazi atrocities are still alive today. The stories of millions who didn’t survive are carried on by family members who continue to face bias and discrimination because of their identity. These jokes can be incredibly painful for survivors, their families and those who carry the burden of traumatic family histories. Jokes about the Holocaust communicate that not only was the discrimination and violence against millions of Jews acceptable during the Holocaust but that discrimination and violence against Jews is still acceptable today.

Prejudicial humor expands what people understand to be socially acceptable behavior to include language that is inappropriate and disrespectful. Biased jokes may have been more socially acceptable several generations ago, the same way that explicit racism was more socially acceptable. As we evolve and grow as a nation, it is important for our recognition and understanding of identity-based biased humor and its harmful impact to evolve as well.

Cavalier and off-handed references to the Holocaust and Holocaust “jokes” are antisemitic and reinforce a system that marginalizes or discriminates against Jewish people. These jokes are harmful whether Jews are present to hear the joke or not. When we tell prejudicial jokes, or laugh at them, we cosign a history of mistreatment and communicate that violence and harm against others is “no big deal.”

### **Large Group Discussion Questions:**

1. Why are cavalier and off-handed Holocaust references, and so-called Holocaust “jokes,” harmful?
2. Should members of the team who heard the remark respond? If so, how? If not, why not?
3. What challenges might members of the team encounter by confronting the coach about the comment?
4. What challenges might members of the team encounter by reporting the incident to their school's administration?

**Scenario 3:** During a game in which members of the opposing team have names associated with Latin American, African and Asian identity groups, spectators associated with your school community chant, “USA! USA! USA!” A student from your school asks the coach to intervene and immediately address the bias, but the coach dismisses the chanting as “harmless banter.”

### **Small Group Discussion Questions:**

1. What assumptions are the spectators making by chanting, “USA! USA! USA!”? What message are they conveying to the team, spectators and others there?
2. How do you think those to whom the chanting is directed feel?
3. What impact might the coach’s response have?
4. How do you think the chanting would impact your school and community?



## Background Information and Context

The chant, “USA! USA! USA!,” assumes that people whose names reflect cultural identities from non-English speaking countries can not be American. This assumption demonstrates anti-immigrant bias, devalues and delegitimizes peoples’ cultural identities, and communicates the harmful message that people from non-English speaking countries don’t belong in the U.S. The assumption also ignores an important piece of family history for most people who live in the U.S. Except for Indigenous Peoples, who inhabited the country’s land for thousands of years before Europeans arrived, all people living in the U.S. today are from, or have ancestry in, another country.

The “othering” of immigrants from non-English speaking countries has occurred throughout U.S. history. The 1790 Naturalization Act provided citizenship to “free white persons” who had resided in the U.S. for at least two years. This racist immigration policy continued even after the abolition of slavery. While the Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery in 1865, Black people were not granted citizenship in the U.S. until several years later. Despite having a long history of living in the U.S., newly freed Black people were left without an official nation. During these years, a push to send Black people “back” to Africa gained momentum. In 1868, the Fourteenth Amendment granted Black people not only citizenship but also the “right to residence” in a country they had lived in for generations. White America’s push to send Black people “back” to a continent that the vast majority had never been to communicated that Black people were unwelcome and un-American.

In 1888, the U.S. Congress enacted the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Scott Act to prohibit the immigration of people from China and deport Chinese nationals who were already residing in the U.S. Immigration restrictions were expanded to include people from India, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East with the passage of the 1917 Immigration Act. It wasn’t until 1943 that the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed. The Immigration Act of 1965 eliminated the National Origins Formula that the U.S. had been using to prohibit immigration from Asian and other non-Western and non-Northern European countries.

More recently in the U.S., members of the Asian community have been blamed for the COVID-19 pandemic and targeted with anti-Asian slurs and violence.

### Large Group Discussion Questions:

1. Do you think that the chanting of “USA! USA!” is harmful? If so, who is being harmed and how? If not, why not?
2. What, if anything, do you think should be done to address the chanting either while or after the game has ended? Who should be involved?

**Scenario 4:** During a game, a member of the opposing team and some of the spectators associated with that team direct the N- word at a member of your team.

### **Small Group Discussion Questions:**

1. What thoughts and feelings come to mind when you see or hear the N-word?
2. What does the N-word communicate?
3. How do you think the N-word impacts the people who are targeted?
4. What is the impact on the targeted school and its community?
5. What is the impact on the school and community whose students and spectators communicated the N- word?

### **Background Information and Context**

Language is one tool that reinforces systems that discriminate against, harm and oppress groups of people. Slurs are harmful language designed to degrade targeted individuals and groups. One such slur is the N-word. Dating back to seventeenth-century colonial America, this slur is directed at Black people and has been used over time to justify disrespect, bias, discrimination and violence.

Beginning in the early 1600s, senseless logic was used to justify the institution of U.S. chattel slavery, or the treatment of enslaved Black people as property. This logic included ideas that Black people were not human and therefore belonged in captivity. Ensuring that the U.S. bought into this racist idea allowed white Americans to profit off the stolen, free, forced labor of enslaved Black people. This inhumane system was the basis for the early U.S. economy. As enslaved Black people generated billions of dollars in wealth for white people in the U.S., they received no compensation and were subjected to constant and brutal violence. The legacy of slavery perpetuates the racial wealth gap we see today.

Kidnapped from Africa, enslaved Black people were often stripped of their native language and names. While “new” names were sometimes given by enslavers, the N-word was frequently used to call or refer to enslaved Black people. This word was also used by white Americans who did not “own” enslaved Black people. The N-word was used to communicate that Black people were inferior and undeserving of basic human dignity and respect. While enslaved Black people resisted their oppression in many ways, doing so was extremely dangerous and could result in various kinds of “punishment” including lashings, lynching and being sold away from family.

Anti-Black racism was reinforced in laws, education, media and politics. Following Emancipation, or the freeing of Black people from enslavement after hundreds of years, Black people continued to be seen as subhuman and were denied equal access to resources and humane treatment. The N-word continued to be used broadly for decades and was a socially acceptable term among mainstream society in the U.S.

While most people in the U.S. now reject the use of the N-word and recognize its harm, there are several current examples of its use to talk about or attack Black people. For most Black people, the N-word invokes immense trauma, pain and grief. Use of the word perpetuates a violent history and reinforces anti-Black racism, a system that marginalizes and oppresses Black people.

It is important to note that throughout history, groups that have been targeted with oppressive language have, at times, decided to reappropriate, or adopt and shift, the meaning of slurs. The act of reappropriating words that were once used to cause widespread harm is a way that targeted groups sometimes choose to take back the power that is lost when outside groups define them in harmful ways. One example of this is the reappropriation of the N-word by the Black community. After centuries of mistreatment, many people in the Black community decided to take back the slur, change the spelling and adopt an alternate definition to signify kinship. Not all members of the Black community choose to use the word in this way or support this act of reappropriation. Each individual Black person decides for themselves whether they want to use the reappropriated term.

Non-Black people should never use the N-word in any context, period—regardless of whether they are in the presence of a Black person or not. This means that non-Black people should never repeat the word if stated by someone else, use the word when singing along to a song with the N-word in it, or read it out loud when in writing. When non-Black people use the N-word unchecked among other non-Black people, they normalize the term among themselves, communicating that the N-word is acceptable.

### **Large Group Discussion Questions:**

1. Should your team, or your team's coach, respond in the moment? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. What, if anything, should the opposing team do?
3. What, if anything, should the coaches, referee(s) or other adults do?
4. What, if anything, do you think can be done prior to athletic events to help prevent offensive, biased and harmful behavior by spectators?

**Scenario 5:** Every year, senior members of an interscholastic sports team in your school persuade new teammates to participate in a locker room activity called, “Teambuilding Tuesdays.” Each week, a different new team member is expected to mock a student or educator in the school based on the student’s or educator’s gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, physical or intellectual ability, race, religion, ethnicity, nationality or body size/weight. If older team members are able to identify the student or educator who is being mocked, the new team member is showered with praise. If older team members aren’t able to identify the student or educator who is being mocked, the new team member is shunned and required to mock another member of the school in the following week(s) until the older team members are able to identify the student or educator who is being mocked. Every new team member’s mocking of a student or educator is recorded in video on a teammate’s cell phone and shared widely.

### **Small Group Discussion Questions:**

1. Have you ever been in a situation where you felt pressured to “go along” with something that made you feel unsafe, uncomfortable or that was harmful to someone else, in order to “get along” with other people? If so, why did you go along with it? What do you think it would’ve taken for you not to “go along?”
2. Would you consider the activity to be teambuilding? Why or why not?
3. What are other ways to engage in teambuilding that don’t ridicule or harm others?
4. Do you think this activity is harmful? If not, why not? If so, how is it harmful and who is being harmed?

### **Background Information and Context**

The mocking of people—making fun of or ridiculing them—based on one or more aspects of their identity dehumanizes targeted individuals, threatens others who identify with that group, and reinforces stereotypes associated with those aspects of identity. Historically, in the U.S. stereotypes have been used to depict Indigenous peoples, Black people, immigrant and religious groups, LGBTQ+ people, people with disabilities, women and others as inferior and undeserving of respect, fair treatment and equitable rights.

Stereotypes are communicated and perpetuated in the news, social media, music, films, schools and other aspects of culture, including sports. More than 1,000 schools across the

U.S. continue to have sports mascots that offensively invoke Indigenous culture and imagery. Research shows that the use of these mascots in schools has a direct and harmful impact on Indigenous youth, including their mental health and success in school. For non-Indigenous youth, these mascots are often the only contact with Indigenous imagery, contributing to cultural biases, and stereotypes.

The more identity-based stereotypes are perpetuated, the more normalized they become in society and the more harm they cause to targeted individuals and groups. Young people whose identities are stereotyped by their peers experience harm to their social-emotional and physical health and sense of safety and belonging.

### **Large Group Discussion Questions:**

1. Should the activity be reported to an adult in the school? If not, why not? If so, to whom should it be reported and what do you think should be done?
2. What, if any, challenges might a team member encounter in reporting the activity to an adult in the school? How might the challenge(s) be addressed?
3. What do schools need to do to prevent situations in which students are pressured to participate in an activity that makes them feel unsafe or that's harmful to someone else?

Sports are a great way for young people to build their self-esteem and feel connected, included and respected. The athletic arena can also provide an opportunity for students from different identity groups, backgrounds and communities to come together, share their commitment to the game, and demonstrate fair play, respect and appreciation for each other. Unfortunately, sporting events have often become spaces and places where bias, discrimination and offensive language are perpetuated. This has a very negative impact on students, the school and the larger community. However, situations can be used and discussed as teachable moments to make it a learning and growing opportunity for everyone to promote safe, respectful and equitable communities on and off the playing field.



# Additional Resources

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**“Moving from Safe Classrooms to Brave Classrooms”**

<https://www.adl.org/resources/tools-and-strategies/moving-safe-classrooms-brave-classrooms>

**“Safe and Inclusive Schools for All”**

<https://www.adl.org/resources/tools-and-strategies/safe-and-inclusive-schools-all>

**“Sports and Social Justice Collection Page”**

<https://www.adl.org/resources/tools-and-strategies/sports-and-social-justice>

**“When it Comes to Bias, We Must Prioritize Impact Over Intent”**

<https://www.adl.org/resources/tools-and-strategies/when-it-comes-bias-we-must-prioritize-impact-over-intent>

## Tools and Strategies



[“Anti-Semitism Uncovered Toolkit: Resources to Stand Up, Share Facts, and Show Strength Against Hate”](#)



[“Moving from Safe Classrooms to Brave Classrooms”](#)



[“Safe and Inclusive Schools for All”](#)



[“Sports and Social Justice Collection Page”](#)



[“When it Comes to Bias, We Must Prioritize Impact Over Intent”](#)

## Agencies



[ACLU of Massachusetts](#)  
617-482-3170



[ADL New England](#)  
617-406-6300



[Office of the Attorney General  
– Civil Rights Division](#)  
617- 963-2917



[Boston Mayor’s Office](#)  
617-635-4500



[Lawyers for Civil Rights- Boston](#)  
617-482-1145



[Office of the Maine Attorney  
General Civil Rights Team  
Project](#)  
207-626-8800



[Maine Department of  
Education](#)  
207-624-6600



[Massachusetts Commission  
Against Discrimination](#)  
617-994-6000



[Massachusetts Department  
of Elementary and Secondary  
Education](#)  
781-338-3000



[Massachusetts Interscholastic  
Athletic Association](#)  
508-541-7997



[NAACP – Boston](#)  
617-427-9494



[New Hampshire Department  
of Education](#)  
603- 271-3494



[Northeastern University Center for  
the Study of Sport in Society](#)  
617-373-4025



[Office for Civil Rights New England  
Region](#)  
800-368-1019



[Rhode Island Department  
of Education](#)  
401-222-4600



[United States Attorney’s Office  
for the District of Massachusetts](#)  
617-748-3100  
“End Hate Now” Hotline:  
1-83-END-H8-NOW



[Vermont Agency of Education](#)  
802-828-1130

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