

Use Another Word

by Nancy Meltzoff
Spring 2007

At Springfield High School, the bell between third and fourth period rings and 1,450 students pour into crowded hallways. The students congregate, joke, and jostle with one another.

Michael, a sophomore wearing headphones and a blue sweatshirt, knocks into Chris's backpack, and Chris calls out, "Watch it, fag!"

An English teacher standing in her doorway overhears the disrespectful language. She sighs, thinks about interrupting the student banter, and then smiles as she realizes she doesn't need to say anything. A third boy, uninvolved, hears what happened. "Hey, Michael," he says, "use another word, please, OK?"

A typical response? Hardly. It occurs at Springfield High School, in Springfield, Ore., where the "Use Another Word" campaign is in its second year.



Illustration: David McLimans

How 'Use Another Word' Started

"Use Another Word" is a student-led initiative to decrease the use of disrespectful language on this diverse, suburban campus. Approximately 27 percent of the students identify as students of color, mostly Latino, in a county that is predominantly white. In 2004-05, nearly 50 percent of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch.

The campaign has its origins in an incident in September 2005. Joey Palermo-Silence, then a sophomore, was sitting in math class and a boy behind him said, "This is gay." Joey, who had long been bothered by such remarks, turned and said, "Use another word, please."

Other students in the class chimed in, "Yeah, use another word!"

The boy responded, "My bad. Sorry if I offended anybody."

Later that week, Joey was in the office of Carmen Gelman, the assistant principal, as part of a Student Advisory Committee formed during the summer.

Gelman, the first Latino/a administrator in the district and a strong advocate of a school culture respecting all students, had told the 15 or so students present that the committee was to give students a voice in what happened at school. The message was, "If you don't like what is going on, you have to find solutions, not just complain."

At the meeting, junior Adam Davis, who self-identifies as European and homosexual, said, "I'm so tired of hearing kids say things like, 'That's so gay... 'faggot'... and racist comments."

Joey, who describes himself as white and Native American, told the story of his interaction in math class. It was like a tiny rock thrown into a still pond.

Students wanted to expand on Joey's initiative and talked about a schoolwide campaign. The principal supported the idea and the students decided to do some preliminary research. That November, members of the Student Advisory Committee fanned out into the hallways, classrooms, and outside around the school with clipboards. For two weeks, they tallied the kinds of disrespectful language they heard.

The students separated the tallies into five categories that they had previously identified: racist, sexist, homophobic, able-ist, and foul language. (Some students did not understand the term *able-ist*, which the committee then defined as derogatory comments about mental or physical disabilities.) Those taking tallies were a racially diverse group of freshmen, sophomores, and juniors, both male and female, who self-identified as biracial, Caucasian, Asian-American, and African-American.

During the tallying, students noted 80-90 racist comments; 30-40 sexist comments; 30-40 able-ist comments; and 50-60 homophobic comments. They tallied only about 20 instances of foul language, but Adam noted that they hadn't really focused on foul language, as they were more interested in discriminatory or derogatory language.

After the tallying, the Student Advisory Committee agreed to start a campaign, which turned into their biggest project of the 2005-06 school year. First, they came up with their kick-off plan. Adam took leadership, ordering buttons, and Jennifer Lam designed a poster. Sylvan Edmonson came up with a pledge for students and teachers to sign. Her idea was: if you want a button, you have to sign the pledge.

I _____ am signing this pledge to stop the use of language that is racist, sexist, able-ist, homophobic, or is offensive and derogatory to any other student, teacher, staff member, or administrator at Springfield High School. I will accomplish this goal by wearing my "Use Another Word" button and encouraging other students to sign the pledge and become aware, like I have, that the words I choose do affect other people and the overall environment in the school. I will also consider becoming involved in the Student Advisory Committee and help to make SHS a safe and diverse place.

Signed: _____.

Assistant Principal Gelman held an all-staff meeting so the students could tell the teachers how they could support the campaign. "We hear these things in the school, and a lot of times no one says anything," explained one student. They showed the teachers the tallies and Adam Davis said, "From now on, if you hear disrespectful language, we'd like you to say, 'Use another word, please.'"

While the Student Advisory Committee discussed listing words students could use instead of disrespectful put-downs, they decided not to do so because they didn't want their peers making up new discriminatory words. They wanted to give a simple and clear message: If you're being disrespectful, you're acting the fool.

The campaign started with a kick-off day in January. During the next week, members of the Student Advisory Committee staffed a table in the courtyard where students could sign the pledge and get buttons. Word spread quickly; Adam had ordered 400 buttons and the committee gave out most of them that first day.

The students also plastered the campus with colorful posters that read, "Use Another Word" in large letters, followed by "Help Prevent Discrimination" and the text, "When you hear a degrading word from another person, just react with the simple phrase, 'Please use another word!'"

Responses to 'Use Another Word'

What was the response? Some students supported the campaign, even describing it as cool. But there was also initial resistance and backlash. Joey estimated that about 40 percent of students were supportive and 60 percent were resistant. Some, for example, claimed the program constituted "school censorship of language." Others said, "This is dumb." Some substituted a different disrespectful word — for instance, if a student used the word "gay" and someone said, "Use another word please," the offending student might respond, "OK, fag."

Other students emphasized the foul language aspect of the pledge, saying, "I can't get a button because I know I'm going to cuss and I can't stick to it." Others cussed more to see what would happen. The student-leaders were prepared for this. "A lot of what I'm trying to do is get people to use more intelligent words to express their emotions," Adam said.

"...Not just say 'Use another word' — say 'Use another word' and say why. Have a little conversation with them. A lot of hatred comes from un-education."

For example, Adam recalled a conversation with a fellow student:

"That's so gay."

"Use another word, please. Is it gay?"

"No, but it's stupid."

"Then you think that homosexuality is stupid?"

"Homosexuality isn't stupid — just this assignment."

"Well, then, it's not gay, you need to say what you mean."

Joey remembered that he received a lot of ridicule at first. Guys on his athletic team regularly used words like *gay*, *Jew*, and *retarded* in a derogatory manner. But the members of the Student Advisory Committee kept exerting positive peer pressure and repeating that disrespectful commentary was not welcome in the school.

Some students claimed that due to freedom of speech, they had the right to use any words they wanted.

Members of the Student Advisory Committee, especially those who had taken government class, countered that the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled that offensive or derogatory words directed towards a minority group are considered fighting words; at a school, fighting words create a hostile environment and are thus not constitutionally protected free speech.

Many students supported the campaign, especially in the area of racist, sexist, homophobic, and able-ist comments. Some responded, "Oh, sorry," or began to use the generic — and less offensive — *jerk* or *stupid*.

The student leaders met and decided that even though they thought stupid could be considered able-ist, they would let it slide in the interest of cooperation. As time went on, most of the students who had been resistant toned down their outward criticism of the program. Although they might not have visibly supported the program by wearing buttons, they kept quiet and didn't push the issue.

The Impact of 'Use Another Word'

The ability to say, "Use another word, please" gave power and support to students who were offended by derogatory put-downs but who may not have wanted to say anything out of fear of repercussions. Because of the campaign, a critical mass of support formed at the school, which made it safe to speak up. It turned out that "there were lots of kids who were bothered by this," Gelman said.

The campaign has also given students a positive experience in social activism. A group of young people, with the support of the adults around them, tried to change things and their actions had a visible impact. "There is a discussion about racial remarks and the fact that it's happening among the kids is wonderful," Gelman said. "I know that many times the discussion doesn't even happen among adults. It's not always pleasant — sometimes it's painful."

Teacher James Mattiace said he has noticed a decrease in the number of fights at the school, and that students are being nicer to each other. District data supports this conclusion: Suspensions went from 318

during 2004-05 to 142 in 2005-06. Suspensions for fighting dropped from 86 to 38, and suspensions for defiance from 176 to 11.

"It works," Mattiace said of the campaign. "We're giving kids tools so when they're offended they can clearly express the fact that they're not happy with what was said."

While students initiated and led the campaign, the support of Gelman has been important. The daughter of a Mexican mother and Russian-Romanian-Jewish father, Gelman has "street credibility" with the students. Following a troubled adolescence, she went on to get a college degree, and worked in human services and juvenile corrections before becoming a school administrator.

Reaching into the Future

When students launched their "Use Another Word" campaign in the fall of 2006, Joey noticed that the incoming students were very supportive. "We set up a table during freshman orientation," he said, "and the freshmen really took it in, which is really good. They would ask me about the buttons and I would tell them about it and they'd say, 'That sounds pretty cool' and then they'd go get a button."

At the end of September, the Student Advisory Committee held another promotional week for "Use Another Word." For three days, members of the SAC sat in the booth, encouraging students to take the pledge and wear the buttons. Adam observed that about every fifth person in the hallways had on a button, and every classroom had a poster. Joey commented that, "I haven't heard the words being thrown around as much."

The SAC is planning more promotions this year to keep the campaign alive, and this year's juniors have promised to provide leadership next year. "Use Another Word" continues to be successful due to the enthusiasm of the entire school community, from students to teachers, staff, administrators, school board members and parents.

More important, the young people spearheading the campaign have learned an essential lesson about the importance of social activism. They have become that "small group of thoughtful, committed people" that Margaret Mead said can "change the world."

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She is interested in hearing from any schools that implement the "Use Another Word" campaign.