

School Leaders Can Bend the Arc of Justice: Students Taking Action Together Strategies That Inspire an Engaged School Climate

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We've often heard the quote by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., paraphrased from Abolitionist Minister Theodore Parker's 1853 sermon, that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice (Block, 2010). Yet, students do not have an infinite time

to wait. School leaders must make a conscious and courageous choice to bend the arc in their practice. Educating amidst a pandemic, as well as witnessing racial injustice, the adverse impacts of social media and gun violence, principals and supervisors have the decisional authority to deliver the moral and civic purpose of public education to nurture

engaged and informed citizens. For this to happen, attention needs to be paid to the climate of schools.

Positive and engaged school climates can counter competing external social forces that diminish the collective spirit. Exposure to public contention on current events roiling communities can elevate student anxiety, despair and

a loss of hope for their future. These issues aren't beyond a student's locus of control. Students Taking Action Together (STAT), an innovation of the Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab, features five instructional strategies for students in grades five through twelve that integrate social emotional competencies into existing academic content or current issues. The strategies foster social constructivist learning experiences that bring students "together" through rich civil discourse to counter the "me" and "I" culture reinforced in social media echo chambers, thereby fostering a "we" mentality (Dumlao, 2018).

Through STAT, school communities can promote an ethic of justice by integrating academic and SEL skills to empower youth to become changemakers. The first four research based instructional strategies, Norms, Yes-No-Maybe, Respectful Debate, Audience Focused Communication (AFC), spiral up to prepare students for the fifth one, P.L.A.N., a social problem-solving strategy. Described in Table 1, these strategies are integrated into existing academic curricula and empower youth to address current problems in their school communities or examine problems of the past, or current issues, equipping them with social problem-solving skills to engage the

democratic process for the common good. While a full discussion of these strategies is beyond the scope of this article (cf. Fullmer, Bond, Nayman, Molyneaux, & Elias, 2022), P.L.A.N. is the most versatile and powerful of the techniques and has broad application for supervisors and school leaders.

The P.L.A.N. Strategy

With P.L.A.N., students collaborate through an inclusive step-by-step process to propose solutions and evaluate their solutions. In these challenging and contentious times, students need frameworks for analyzing relevant situations and generating constructive, compassionate responses (Fullmer & Bond, 2021). It is in every school administrator's best interest to empower students as citizens of their school communities to effectively prepare them for local and global citizenship.

School based problems provide an ideal platform for students to learn a social problem-solving strategy since they live the realities of the problem. The four steps of the strategy are:

P = problem identification and description to understand the problem from the perspectives of all stakeholders;

L = list and weigh possible options to solve the problem, again, based on stakeholders' perspectives and goals;

A = action plan development of the most viable solution and anticipating obstacles that might affect the plan;

N = notice successes and areas for improvement through reflection.

If your school already uses a problem solving strategy that is universally taught, we advise using that strategy or blending in appropriate elements of P.L.A.N. as you see fit.

School based problems like adopting gender neutral bathrooms, the nutritional quality and cultural appropriateness of school lunches, addressing bullying and cyberbullying, academic cheating, censoring library books on racial injustice and LGBTQIA+, and replacing suspension policies with restorative justice measures, are timely issues that students can engage through P.L.A.N. to positively contribute to shaping their school environment. As students learn P.L.A.N., they can apply it to new and perhaps currently unforeseen issues, further reinforcing their sense of empowerment. As school leaders, integrating instructional practices like P.L.A.N. nurtures student agency and prosocial behaviors for a healthy and just school culture (Elias, 2018).

Table 1

The Five STAT Strategies	
Norms	Engage students to develop ethical standards that lay the groundwork for a relationship-centered classroom community.
Yes-No-Maybe	Offer students opportunities for peer opinion sharing, in which they reflect on their views on an issue to take a stand and actively listen to the diverse perspectives of their classmates.
Respectful Debate	Encourage students to practice the skill of perspective taking by analyzing all sides of an issue, in order to gain an appreciation for diverse viewpoints and a level of comfort in modifying their original thinking.
Audience-Focused Communication (AFC)	Allow students opportunities to tailor their language and style of presentation to a specific audience with the goal of understanding the perspective and context of their audience and communication, toward optimally conveying their good ideas about changing a policy or practice for the greater good of their classroom, school, and society.
P.L.A.N.	Involve students in collaborative problem solving with action planning to make a change in policies and practices that maintain privilege and power and limit whose voices have input in key decisions.

Problem Identification and Description

Using the issue of gender neutral bathrooms as an example, in the first part of P.L.A.N., students (it's best for students to work in groups of 5-6, with multiple groups working on the same issue for later comparison) engage in discussion to identify and describe the problem from various perspectives. Often, there isn't clarity or understanding around what the problem is or that there is even a problem at all. First, students research the problem, using a variety of background sources the teacher and students can co-select to explore the facts, the stakeholders, and impacts of the problem. With school based issues, students will learn to interface with school personnel, policies and resources. After discussing their findings, students write a problem description as a group to document and clarify what the problem is to share with the whole class. Coming together around a problem description strengthens the group process, exercises consensus-making skills, and fuels curiosity. This step motivates digging into the nuanced work of researching the problem from multiple stakeholder perspectives, which is necessary to lead social change in a democracy.

List Options

Next, students convene in their groups to use their research to list out options to identify a viable solution. Students begin work through establishing a SMART goal that sets clear parameters for a solution (O'Neill, 2000). Using the SMART goal as a guide, they use their research to brainstorm potential solutions that would lead to a workable solution that considers the competing

interests of the stakeholders. Then, they weigh the pros and cons of each solution, to identify the most viable solution that could feasibly be implemented. In this light, students discern, wrestle with the facts in their thinking, and critique their thinking while accounting for and appreciating the many perspectives around the issue to determine the most viable solution where stakeholders would adopt gender neutral bathrooms.

Action Planning

In this third step, students decide the most viable solution to develop into a step-by-step action plan that they could advocate for or implement beyond the classroom. The value of social responsible decision-making is highlighted in this phase of the strategy, as students consider the competing interests of stakeholders to shape an actionable solution. Students will spend time anticipating roadblocks that might impede their solution, or areas where the solution is too vague. In the example of gender neutral bathrooms, the class might partner with the Student Council and meet with the building leadership to craft a proposal to submit to the building principal. By researching, planning, and arriving at a position for gender neutral bathrooms, students exercise the information literacy, communication and social emotional learning skills to be changemakers in their school community.

Notice Successes

After action planning, the class will convene to reflect on and discuss their efforts using the strategy, including a comparison of how different groups'

approaches and how they arrived at them, where applicable. As students evaluate their efforts by assessing what went well and what they could have done differently using PLAN, social relationships are strengthened and the use of a problem solving strategy to arrive at responses to complex situations is reinforced. If the action plan didn't lead to the adoption of gender neutral bathrooms, the teacher encourages students to discuss appropriate next steps, if any. The honesty and vulnerability of this reflective thinking enriches peer-to-peer social attachment. Reflecting upon their efforts enlightens students that the process itself is a part of learning that the complexity of change often necessitates multiple solution attempts sustained over time. This hopeful component of the strategy awakens a social consciousness, restoring hope that problems can be confronted collectively to make a difference in their community.

An Opportunity for School Leaders

Without school leaders' courage, conviction and commitment to nurturing engaged and empowered students today, there will be a vacuum of informed, emotionally intelligent, innovative and diverse leaders tomorrow. As you reflect upon your role, imagine the bigger picture and the broader, long-term goals of your leadership. Such reflective moments can inspire you to bend the arc, bring STAT to your school or department, to transform school culture and empower youth to make their school and our world more just.

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