

SERVE ALL

BY KATY O'GRADY

As a school counselor, you're committed to serving all students. That commitment is more important than ever in today's precarious climate.

Like schools across the country, Riverside Polytechnic High School in Riverside, Calif., has felt the impact of the increase in hatred and bias in the United States over the last year. Hate crimes – those based on ethnicity/national origin, religion, gender identity/expression or sexual orientation – increased in 2016 by an average of 13 percent in U.S. cities, according to the nonpartisan Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University. In the Chicago area, the Council on American-Islamic Relations reported 400 hate crimes in 2016 and had already counted 175 incidents just two months into the new year. In New York City, police department data show that anti-Semitic hate crimes in January and February 2017 nearly doubled from the previous year.



To learn about students' experiences in this climate, the Human Rights Campaign conducted an online survey, in which 50,000 young people participated. Seventy percent of them reported witnessing bullying, hate messages or harassment based on race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, immigration status or gender during or since the 2016 presidential election.

Many students at Poly High School were fearful. "We have a Gay-Straight Alliance Club here on campus; I know they've been worried," said Yuridia Nava, a school counselor at Poly. She also heard from African-American students that they feared an increase in situations that could lead to police violence.

Then, in the wake of the 2016 election, protests broke out across California: students walked out of class, marched in the streets and held rallies. But Nava and her fellow school counselors ran an empathy forum the day after the election that helped keep Poly students in the building, sharing their fears and feelings. "We were

the only school in our district that didn't face any type of rioting or students protesting or walk-outs," she said. The forum allowed all students – from any political party – to come together and express their feelings safely and respectfully. "I had students who were Republican say, 'Even though I'm Republican, I'm here for my peers, I don't necessarily have the same views, but this is my party,'" Nava said.

To be proactive, Nava and her colleagues went to every class and spoke with students. "We got our government teachers involved to give us correct information on what a president can and cannot do," Nava said, describing an overview that students don't normally receive until government class in senior year. Teachers made themselves available and had open discussions about tolerance, using teaching resources provided by the school counselors.

Nava's district colleagues have seen ugly incidents. "Kids are walking in and yelling in the classroom, 'Build the wall,'

School counselors are champions for all students.



'Get out,' and kids are having things said to them," she said. In Wisconsin, Lisa Koenecke, a school counselor at River Bluff Middle School, said, "For the first time, students who identified as Mexican were frightened either because of what was happening in the country or were asking, 'Am I going to be deported?'" Another first for her has been the experience of



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When hate – and the fear, anger and upheaval it sparks – follows students to school, what’s a school counselor to do?



“the majority population having more bravado speaking out against those who are marginalized.”

Rosemarie Thompson, a school counselor at Belmont Preparatory High School, in the Bronx, New York, an area with many immigrant families, said, “The tenor of the school was almost sad, it was silent after the election.” Her

students have expressed concern about their futures, wondering, “Can they go to college? Many of their families are not citizens, so will they get deported? Will they be split up? Will the immigration officers come into the school buildings?”

When hate – and the fear, anger and upheaval it sparks – follows students to school, what’s a school counselor to do?

Focus on the Students

School counselors are champions for all students; this is spelled out in ASCA’s Ethical Standards for School Counselors. All students have the right to “be respected, be treated with dignity and have access to a comprehensive school counseling program that advocates for and affirms all students from diverse populations including but not limited to: ethnic/racial identity, nationality, age, social class, economic status, abilities/disabilities, language, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity/expression, family type, religious/spiritual identity,

emancipated minors, wards of the state, homeless youth and incarcerated youth.”

Beginning by considering your own biases is essential, according to Thompson. “Sometimes your own biases can get in the way of how you’re going to work with your students,” she said. To assist students with concerns following the 2016 election, “as a staff, we talked about that amongst ourselves and got rid of whatever anger we were feeling to best work with the kids.”

Koenecke makes sure students know she is a safe person they can come to in the building. When a sixth-grader approached her with deportation concerns, Koenecke sought to learn what the girl was being told at home. “I didn’t want to speak from a privileged lens, and I don’t know what their reality is and what was truly going to happen,” Koenecke said. She affirmed the student’s feelings, asked about her home situation and offered support such as an interpreter for the girl’s father, if requested. “You also have to be cautious. Maybe



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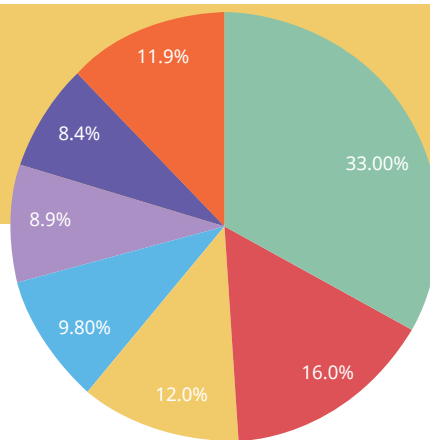
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School counselors who feel isolated or unsupported must build connections, starting with their state and national school counselor organizations.



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in their culture, she wasn't supposed to talk to me at all. So I just walked a thin line and made sure nobody was making fun of her and did lots of visual checks on her, and she's still thriving right now," Koenecke said.

Keeping the focus on students can pave the way if a school counselor encounters resistance from parents, school staff or administrators. When Nava's school counseling department proposed the post-election empathy forum, some staff questioned the need for it, and calls came in from some upset parents. But perspectives changed "once we explained it wasn't a political thing, that it was about coming to a common ground with students, just being there for kids," she said. "In the end, it was the best thing we could do because we were the only school that had no problems," she said.

Koenecke is a strong advocate for LGBTQ students and describes her district as both conservative and "very, very supportive." She has made it a personal mission to get to know each of the school board members so "they know that I'm here, they know that I'm good for kids. Keeping the kids first is really important," she said. This has made board members more receptive to her proposed policies or curricula because they know Koenecke is motivated by what's best for the students.

When establishing relationships with school board members it's important to maintain strong relationships with the principal and superintendent and be open

with them so they don't feel the school counselor is bypassing them and going straight to the school board.

Like Koenecke, Thompson believes a school counselor's job is to show a lot of visibility. Visibility reminds students a school counselor is there for them, and it also helps develop relationships with teachers. "Sometimes teachers want us to come into their classrooms just to stick our head in and give reassurance to kids," she said. She also suggests observing students in the lunchroom, tuning into chatter in the halls and getting a sense of the mood and movement in the school. After-school clubs are another opportunity for school counselors to have visibility and build trust by connecting with students outside of the usual setting, Thompson said.

If You Stand Alone, Stand Strong

Lack of support from administrators, staff, parents or the community can make the school counselor's role even more important. "School counselors have to be on that front line more than ever, because we're really the protectors of our students," Thompson said. This requires being educated on what's taking place in the political arena "so we know how to guide our kids," she said.

When Nava speaks with school counselors who feel they aren't supported by their districts and states, she offers reassurance. "You have the power within your four walls in your office where a student can speak freely and confidentially to you as a school counselor. Within your office, you can make miracles happen." In her time as a school counselor at a Catholic school, she could not overtly advocate for LGBTQ youth. "But I always had a safe zone sticker and ally sticker in my office so kids knew that once they came in and we closed that door, they could talk to me about anything," she said.

School counselors who feel isolated or unsupported must build connections, starting with their state and national school counselor organizations. "There's a plethora of resources out there," Koenecke said. With state membership in particular, "you'll already have a whole bunch of people who are school counselors in similar areas and districts so you

can get to know who they are instead of just staying in your office.”

Be a Proactive Advocate


The pressures on marginalized students aren't likely to disappear any time soon, which means school counselors will continue to be “in the trenches and on the forefront” of supporting them, Koenecke said. Thompson suggests bringing in speakers from external organizations supporting children and families. Her school has sought out and shared legal guidance on what to do if immigration officials were to enter the school building. “I think the kids use our school as a safe haven. It's when they leave that they express more concerns,” Thompson said. The school counselors also have organized presentations for parents offering guidance from speakers who work with immigrant families.

School counselors can equip themselves to support all students by staying informed about district policies, school

data and resources. “Find out what your policies say,” Koenecke said. Her school counseling team worked with a local office to expand their pupil nondiscrimination policy to specify gender identity, gender nonconforming and students who identify as trans. “To me, it's a really important and strategic move to have those policies in place to back yourself up if there is a situation,” she said.

Nava has increased communication with community agencies and has worked with them to bring in guest speakers on voter registration, attending universities and other topics. Some of her students work with U.S. Congressman Mark Takano's office, “which gives free help for students applying for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals or who need legal advice,” Nava said. Local law enforcement gave a workshop at her school offering guidance on what students should do if they're pulled over and how to best handle different situations and asked for student feedback and suggestions.

Know your student data, and use it to identify appropriate community resources, Koenecke suggests. “Find out how many students identify as students of color or marginalized race or religion, and find out who can be a resource for that even if you're in a rural community,” she said. In the community, she points to parents as a resource school counselors can engage through an advisory council. She is working to build connections with local businesses to expand career programs in the school, build community connections and change general misconceptions about teenagers.

“Regardless of our personal religious or political affiliation, we need to be there for all kids. We have to be very conscious of what we do, and just like our standards say, we advocate for all,” Nava said. 

Katy O'Grady is a freelance writer who last wrote for ASCA School Counselor magazine about trauma-informed schools.



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