

# Introduction

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## The Partners

The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) is committed to helping middle grade educators reach every student, grow professionally, and create great schools. It helps all students ages 10 to 15 succeed as learners and make positive contributions to their communities and to the world.

Corwin has one objective and one objective only: to help educators do their important work better.

Creating Cultures of Dignity is an organization founded by educator Rosalind Wiseman that works with communities to shift the way we think about children and teens' emotional and physical well-being.

Together, we work to help people—students, teachers, families, and community members—to understand the academic, social, and emotional complexities of young adolescence and middle level education. We envision a school in which educators are self-reflective, passionate, and capable of walking alongside our students as they navigate their adolescence and education so they, too, can reach their social, emotional, and academic potential.

## Welcome to the Program!

*Owning Up* is a tool to help you work with the most interesting, funny, and challenging people in the world: tweens and teens. It's also a tool to teach young people the capacity to understand their individual development in relation to group behavior with their peers, the social dynamics that lead to discrimination and bigotry, and the skills to be socially competent in the difficult yet common social conflicts they experience.

Whether you're teaching *Owning Up* in a school, a team, or a youth-serving organization, what you have in your hands is a flexible, dynamic curriculum that respects your knowledge of the young people you work with and the communities you operate in.

That said, *Owning Up* does have core principles, and we assume that educators who will implement *Owning Up* agree with the following:

- We are in partnership with the young people we work with, and they are often our best teachers.
- A young person's academic success and engagement is interconnected with their social competency.

- “Soft skills”—the ability to work with others, negotiate conflict, and understand and respect the needs of others in balance with one’s own needs—is a difficult skill set to master and requires constant and graduated practice.
- To be credible and effective educators, adults must self-reflect on how they interact with young people. A culture of dignity is impossible if the adults don’t hold themselves to the same standards they demand of their students.
- No community is immune from abuses of power. But just as true is the possibility that any community can effectively address even the worst injustices that can occur within it.

*Owning Up* examines the cultural constructs that influence young people’s socialization. It incorporates cultural definitions of gender, sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, and other forms of “isms” that affect young people’s beliefs and decision making around self-esteem, friendships, group dynamics, and social and physical aggression.

But if you’ve taught this age group before, you know that implementing *Owning Up*, or any program like it, can be challenging because young people are rightfully skeptical. They have endured unrealistic assemblies or character-building programs and heard too many superficial slogans that don’t reflect the complexity of the issues they face or include them as an essential part of the process to create solutions. Worse, they’ve interacted with adults who demand their obedience and respect yet don’t treat them with the dignity that any person deserves, regardless of age.

In spite of the risk we are asking young people to take, we have seen time and time again that if adults listen to young people before we give them advice, they will take the leap of faith with us. That is also what *Owning Up* is about: collaboration between educators and students to create honest discussion about the issues most challenging to young people to then help them find the courage, passion, and ability to create the world in which they want to live.

## Who Teaches *Owning Up*?

We are aware that some educators come to *Owning Up* on their own, while others are told to implement it by a supervisor—sometimes with less guidance and support than they need. We also appreciate how frustrating it can be to be told to lead a program without the necessary resources or time to do your best. What we want you to hear from us is that you know the young people you work with and we’ve done our best to give you a comprehensive teaching strategy that will empower you and your students. We encourage you to make this curriculum your own. And if you modify an exercise or come up with another way to approach a topic we cover, we want to know about the great innovative ideas you’ve come up with. Therefore, later in this introduction we will outline the educator support network we have created to make that possible.

## About the Sessions

Here's a more specific breakdown of what *Owning Up* covers:

- Identify and discuss behaviors and attitudes associated with groups, popularity, trust, exclusion, and bullying.
- Understand the impact of how one expresses anger and learn strategies to effectively communicate when anxious or in conflict.
- Develop a plan of action when a friend or group demeans one or someone else.
- Recognize the influence of culture on individuals' behavior and decision making, from friendships to academic engagement.
- Develop an understanding of how culture defines gender and race and how that can affect self-concept, self-expression, and interactions with others.
- Identify and strengthen support networks and personal standards in relationships.
- Clarify and promote the definition of *consent*—across the spectrum of young people's interactions and relationships.

## The *Owning Up* Teaching Strategies

### The SEAL Strategy

A primary goal of *Owning Up* is to help students process their “messy” feelings (anger, sadness, frustration, anxiety) into a meaningful, substantive dialogue with another person. In *Owning Up*, this is taught through the SEAL strategy. But like any strategy where young people are asked to put feelings into words and to use those words, the approach is often perceived as unrealistic and “adult speak.” So you shouldn't be surprised if you get a lot of resistance from your students when you teach SEAL. They may think you are trying to put words in their mouths, or make them talk like a “robot.” When that happens, we have found it helpful to say: “Everyone's probably going to experience a conflict where they lose their words or think of the thing they really wanted to say five minutes after the conversation (or argument) ended. SEAL is just a strategy to figure out how to speak your truth in those situations.”

Another way to think about introducing SEAL is to compare it to the students' favorite games. Whether it's a role-playing game, a sports game, an adventure game, or even a first-person shooter game, there are always battles or competitions to be found. To get ready for that moment, a player considers his or her strengths, resources, lay of the land, position, or types of items they could gather—and then considers the same of their opponents: What are their strengths? How will they use the landscape? What are their powers? How can they avoid the lethal blow? The point of the game is to do your best and “level up” so you're more prepared and able to handle different situations the next time you play.

It's the same thing with SEAL. SEAL enables someone to think through their strategy so they have the maximum possibility of handling themselves with mastery in the moment of conflict and discomfort. The “pushback” is the opposing force's response: the things the other person can do to retaliate, put you on the defensive, or create confusion and

distraction. The only difference between a battle in a game and using SEAL in real life (and it's a big one) is that instead of the goal being to win (i.e., total destruction of the other team), it's to manage yourself in a conflict where you are taken seriously and you uphold the dignity of all involved. Doing any part of SEAL is a success—even if it's not immediately used to confront the person.

Steps in the SEAL strategy are as follows:

**Stop:** Breathe, observe, and ask yourself what the situation is about. Decide when and where you can talk to the person so the person will be most likely to listen to you.

**Explain:** Take your negative feelings and put them into words—be specific about what you don't like and what you want to happen instead. You realize you are making a request, so you know you may not get what you want. But at least you are being clear with yourself and others.

**Affirm and acknowledge:** State your right to be treated with dignity by the other person and your responsibility to do the same. If appropriate, acknowledge your part in contributing to the situation.

**Lock:**

- *Lock in the friendship:* Decide to resolve the situation and continue being friends.
- *Take a break:* Decide to take a break from the friendship but agree to talk later about reestablishing the friendship.
- *Lock out the friendship:* Decide that you can't be friends right now.

Even though *Owning Up* is filled with concrete strategies about what to say and do in various situations, these strategies will work only if the students use SEAL to come up with their own words. If they try to precisely follow the script or think that's what we are asking them to do, it won't work. And it's the same for you as the educator. In order to make your teaching efforts authentic and credible to your students, you also have to make *Owning Up* your own.

## Labels

In *Owning Up*, you will go through a general breakdown of the different roles people can take in groups. However, placing labels on people's behavior is tricky and can even be counterproductive. No one likes other people to label them. The roles in *Owning Up* are used as a way to identify why a person acts a specific way when they're in a group, and to understand the possible consequences. Ideally, a label is something a person decides to pick and associate with themselves—even if there are negative things connected to that label—because it gives them insight into their behavior and decision making. Likewise, a label should be something a person can take off when it no longer feels right to them because that awareness leads to greater self-knowledge and self-management.

## How to Talk About Gender

We discuss gender a lot in *Owning Up*, and that can be complicated as well. Many young people are challenging core assumptions about gender and demanding expanded gender

definitions and expressions. At the same time, negative and confining gender stereotypes still permeate our culture and people's interactions with and perceptions of each other. *Owning Up* is taught in diverse communities that have different comfort levels with how a person expresses their gender. Our bottom line is that every person's dignity must be respected. Every student has a right to feel comfortable, safe, and acknowledged.

Specifically, if you teach the session on dating and relationships, we encourage you to state at the beginning that you will be pronoun neutral so that all students feel included without having to "out" themselves. Something you can say is, "I will be doing my best to not be gender specific when we talk about dating or relationships so that all students feel comfortable. And please feel free to make other suggestions so we can do our best to make everyone feel included in the conversation."

### **Conducting Role Plays**

Role-playing can be an excellent teaching tool to get students out of their seats and experiencing the curriculum in a more socially and physically dynamic way. Some educators love it and some don't. Some students love it and some don't. If you're in the camp of not being a huge fan of role plays, that's okay; there's plenty else to do in the sessions. However, you may wish to consider doing them just to get out of your own comfort zone of teaching.

The curriculum offers role plays that reflect students' experiences, but it's critical to ask your students to use scenarios from their own experiences so that they feel comfortable sharing. That being said, sometimes role plays can be too awkward or uncomfortable to play out. If this is the case with your students, you or a student volunteer can read the role-play scenario aloud and use it to generate discussion. Carey Goldstein, a middle school counselor who uses *Owning Up*, encourages you to think about roles plays this way:

If the kids do not come up with [role plays] on their own I use scenarios that are a year or two old so kids do not know which case I am talking about, but I can say without a doubt that it happened in our school. This helps when they pretend things do not happen here. I stress with the students to be realistic and not just act out what they think teachers want to hear.

As the educator, it is your responsibility to choose which students play which roles. When you do this, keep in mind what you know about the individual students. For example, it can be a critical learning opportunity for students who have high social status to play roles in which they don't—and vice versa. In this type of reversal, it is important for you as the educator to make sure they are performing consistently with the role assigned to them, not the role they tend to play in real life. But, in general, the key to an effective role play is to set up the situation and then allow the students to act freely according to what they think is the most realistic portrayal of events.

It is also your responsibility to stop the role play when necessary. The time to stop is when the dynamics you want to get across in the session are revealed. If for any reason you believe the role play is being manipulated by some of the actors to reinforce the social positions in the group, you can stop the role play and conduct the "getting stuck" exercise, described later in this introduction.

Unless otherwise specified, the role plays are intended to be conducted twice: The first time, the students act out the most likely way a situation would occur. The second time, the students act out what should happen to give the subjects power over the situation and ensure that they can speak their truth. Often, this second role play involves SEAL. As part of the process, you can ask them which feels more real and how to work toward getting to the version with SEAL. If the group is really resistant, you can go through each step and ask them to tell you why they think it won't work. Through that process, they realize why it will work, and they buy in.

## **Bystanders**

A *bystander* is defined as “someone who is present at an event but who does not take part.” *Owning Up* defines the dynamic of bystanding as more complex. All bystanders have an emotional reaction in the moment, and their reaction is often based on the relationship they have with the target or the aggressor and their place in the social group. In large part in school, the sense of the bystander's obligation to stick up for the target or join the aggressor depends on various dynamics, including how much they like the target or aggressor, the public nature of the situation, and how much they perceive they will suffer if the aggressor turns their attention on them.

Bystanders are frequently convinced to join the person abusing power because they believe they'll sacrifice their position in the group if they speak out. If bystanders are silent (which some define as being neutral), their “nonaction” either looks like support for the person abusing power or sends the message that they're powerless to stop him or her. This isn't to say that being a bystander who speaks out is easy. Far from it. Speaking out against these power dynamics can be terrifying, and young people know this like they know how to breathe.

The bystander issue often arises when students are role-playing—specifically, when you ask students what responsibility they have to stop people from bullying others. If you tell them to imagine, in the scenario, that they are good friends with the target, there is usually a strong motivation to intervene. But if you tell them they don't like or know the target, there is usually no motivation to intervene. Your goal as educator is to reframe the dynamic for the students so that the relationship to the target or the aggressor is not the determining factor in whether students choose to speak up. Sessions 2, 4, 5, and 7 will provide you with more structure regarding how to walk the students through the process, but in general you want to encourage your students to ask themselves the following:

- Do you think you should intervene in some way?
- What is your relationship to the target?
- If your relationship to the target was different than what you have described, would your motivation to intervene change?
- Why does your connection to that person determine if you should intervene?
- Regardless of your answers above, what is an effective strategy to intervene so that the target's dignity is affirmed and they feel some power in the situation?

An ideal bystander recognizes the moment when some kind of intervention is necessary to affirm the dignity and/or physical safety of the target(s), and then acts. That action has

countless possibilities, but the lesson to be imparted is to pay attention to the dynamic that is stripping the target of their dignity, to acknowledge the bystander's feelings about what's happening, to affirm the target's dignity, and to reinforce their safety.

## Educator Responsibilities

If you love working with young people, if you're okay with throwing out your carefully prepared lesson plan because your students have gotten really engaged in a discussion, and if you don't take it personally when they argue with you, you'll be a great *Owning Up* educator. Too often adults don't want to allow young people to have these uncomfortable conversations, but we think creating an environment where young people can passionately disagree while treating each other with dignity is one of the most important skills they can develop—and one we all benefit from when these young people become adults who can engage in constructive dialogue.

As a general rule, you want to create a learning environment where students can feel uncomfortable but not unsafe. In order to do this, you must first ask yourself how these issues push your own buttons. For example, what experiences of power over others have you had—especially as a young person—that impact your professional and personal life now? Other questions are equally important. If your race is different from that of your students, do you feel comfortable talking to them about racism and different people's experience with race? If you are close to them in age, how does that affect your teaching? Do some of the students intimidate you? Why? How do you handle this dynamic?

To help you with your own self-evaluation, we have included an individual assessment at the end of this Introduction and some “Check Your Baggage” opportunities embedded in the sessions where we ask you questions to help you prepare for the session you are about to teach.

Observe your students both inside and outside the teaching environment. Watch how they walk into the room and take their seats; observe where students group themselves in public spaces (the lunchroom, the hallways, a wall where students hang out); look at where socially powerful students place themselves in relation to adult authority figures. Do socially powerful students stay as far away as possible from a supervising teacher while waiting for the bus after school? Or, in contrast, do they feel comfortable occupying the same space as adults? Observing behavior patterns can give you important insights into the social structures of your students and how they may bring them into your classroom.

Also remember that students participate in different ways. One student will be better at verbal discussions, while another will contribute more comfortably through writing. Each means of expression is equally valid. Just remember to look for opportunities where students will have various ways to share personal experiences.

## Creating Connection

It's the small moments of relating to each other that build trust among instructors and students. Effective educators connect, even briefly, with students so each one knows they are seen and acknowledged as a valued member of the community. “Nice shoes!” or “I saw your drawing in art class—it's great!” or a warm hello can make a profound difference.

## **Listen**

Listening means being prepared to be changed by what you hear. At the moments you feel as though you need to talk most, listen. Sometimes you'll want to get through the agenda, but your students will be stuck on a particular topic. What do you do? Although you shouldn't let a personal student experience hijack the session, if your group is engaged and participating, forget your agenda and focus on what they are discussing as the way to achieve the curriculum's overall goals.

A student might ask a question to which you don't know the answer or on which you feel you need to reflect more before answering. If so, tell the class that the question or comment was a good one and that you want time to make sure you are giving the best possible answer. Then begin the next session with, "Last week a student asked a great question that I told you I needed to think about. So before we go on I want to tell you my answer and then you can tell me what you think."

## **Respect the Power of Their Culture**

Familiarize yourself with the books and social media platforms they mention; listen to their music, play their video games even it's just for a few minutes, watch their movies, and notice their style. You don't have to like any of these things, but you do have to acknowledge that there is something in them that your students find compelling. If you don't understand a word they use, ask them to define it. Yes, they'll laugh at you, but you are demonstrating that you care enough about their culture to ask.

## **Establish Your Ethical Authority**

When you value your students' feelings and perspectives, they will feel safe to discuss and disagree about difficult issues and topics. For example, tell your students about good work they've done or positive risks they've taken. Tell them when you disagree. Avoid making comments about their physicality like their height, hair, size, or body type—basically, anything that would make you feel uncomfortable if someone said it to you. If you make a mistake (and we all have), apologizing to them demonstrates what ethical leaders do when they've made a mistake.

## **Value of Silence**

Your students may be quiet when difficult issues are raised or when they think about the issues being presented. Don't be intimidated by silence. Ask your students about it: "Why did it get quiet when we talked about this issue?" Allow your students quiet time to think and reflect, through writing or informal dialogue, as they work through issues that have been raised. In addition, some students may feel more comfortable talking collaboratively in a small group instead of in front of the whole group.

## **Understand Students' History**

Unfortunately, young people often experience adults belittling or underestimating their problems, stressors, and conflicts. Never underestimate the possibility that your students are currently struggling with serious problems. Their experiences shape the attitudes and beliefs they bring to class. On the other side of the coin, your students undoubtedly

have untapped potential, positive interests, and hidden talents that may go unrecognized or uncelebrated during the course of the school day, and it is your responsibility to know and honor those triumphs—as you also attend to their challenges.

### **Seriously . . . Be Uncomfortable**

Successful use of the *Owning Up Curriculum* necessitates moments of genuine discomfort for both educators and students. These uncomfortable moments are often essential for genuine learning to take place, but how these moments occur is critical. You must always elicit students' answers. If students are too embarrassed to say aloud what they are thinking, then encourage them to write their thoughts down and give them to you in private. Always remember that especially for younger students, "bad words" can be frightening. If you need to put those words up on the board or flip chart, but it makes your students uncomfortable, explain that you are talking about these words precisely because they are so hurtful. Let students know that you can erase the words after you put them there.

People can also be incredibly uncomfortable talking about "diversity" issues. People give lip service to respecting "difference" all the time. They say platitudes like "everyone is equal," but it's common for adults to be so uncomfortable with these topics that they don't allow young people to wrestle with their thoughts and feelings about these issues—and that stifles any meaningful conversation. There is nothing offensive or wrong about respectfully asking someone to explain something about themselves that you don't understand. If your students say something racist or bigoted, lean into those conversations. *Owning Up* should be a place where it's safe to make "mistakes." If someone says something offensive, that doesn't mean other people have the right to jump on that person and assume the worst. To put it another way, "Be hard on ideas but easy on people."

### **Let Your Students Get to Know You**

It is equally important to let students get to know you. Here are some suggestions.

#### **Manage Impressions**

As soon as you walk into the room, your students will know whether you genuinely love working with people their age. They will also know if you are intimidated, want to be a friend and not an adult, or are burnt out. Your students also will know who is in control—you or the most socially powerful students in the group. Groups benefit from parameters, and the procedures presented in Session 1, "Getting Started," are designed to help you establish your authority while making all students feel like they have an important voice in the discussion.

#### **Move Around**

Don't get stuck in front of the group, looking as though you are glued to the front of the class. Move around so the students know you are comfortable in their space and excited to be there with them. When a student is being distracting, move nearby so your presence is felt but not in an overbearing way. And remember, you can always

experiment with the learning environment. Experiment with different desk configurations that help collaboration and cooperative dialogue: quads, triads, semicircles, and whole circles. A whole circle configuration lessens the power binary between teacher and student because everyone is sitting together without front and back rows, and no teacher is standing at the front.

### **Share**

On occasion, share your own experiences with your students. Don't do it constantly, because then it will come across as if you're "teaching" this program to process your own issues. But if you share strategically, your students will connect with stories about your experiences when you were their age, especially those about when you made mistakes but learned from them. Although you should avoid sharing stories about your life now to maintain boundaries between you and your students, sharing your earlier life experiences makes your relationship with your students more reciprocal and less of an invasion of their privacy. To connect with your students, remember your feelings and thoughts about yourself and your peers at their age. As students share their experiences, you will also remember how you felt when you faced these issues.

## **Common Challenges**

The following describe challenges that commonly arise when teaching *Owning Up*.

### **Personal Stories**

When a student wants to tell a personal story, ask them to leave out the names of the other students involved. Also ask them to avoid very detailed physical descriptions of other students. Not only can this objectify some students, but this is a tactic that some students use when asked not to use names. While it's true that the students may know who is being talked about, it's important to emphasize the focus on the reason why the student believes the story is connected to the session.

It's also common for at least one student to constantly share their personal stories with the rest of the class. While we want to encourage personal reflection, when a student monopolizes the class with personal stories, overall learning suffers. When that happens, focus the student on how the experience they're sharing reflects the overall content and then redirect the class.

### **Name-Calling**

In or outside of the class, you may hear students use degrading comments against one another. When it happens in the session, these words are usually said so quickly that educators may be confused about whether to stop and address the name-calling or continue with the session. We suggest that you quickly stop and ask the following question: "You just said Jason is gay. What does the word *gay* mean to you?" Your students (especially the younger ones) will almost always say, "Stupid. Dumb." Your response is, "By using the word *gay* to put someone down, you are going against the guidelines we all we agreed on. So you may not use that word." That way, you avoid being derailed by a long conversation, you're showing your values in action, and you

stop the discriminatory behavior—based on the group’s own rules. There are many opportunities throughout the program to further explore the damage these types of words can cause.

### **Watered-Down Words**

*Owning Up* challenges students to closely examine the definition and meaning of words. It asks educators to challenge themselves in the same way—especially concerning words that they commonly use with young people. For example, *self-respect*, *grit*, and *healthy choices*, to name just a few examples, are words that have lost much of their power with youth. They are words that adults use when lecturing youth—so it’s easy for students to tune them out. When these words do come up, immediately ask your students, “What does that word mean to you? What do you think it means to me? Imagine that word is a person walking down the hallway. What would that person look like? How would that person walk?” The goal is to have students define these words concretely so they are meaningful to them.

Self-esteem is another concept that students routinely dismiss because many have endured ineffective self-esteem programs, and many know cruel people who behave as if they have high self-esteem. We define *self-esteem* in the words of educator Dr. JoAnn Deak: “connectedness, compassion, and competency in fairly equal measure.” Our goal is to enable our students to feel like they can navigate difficult social problems while being true to themselves and morally courageous in their actions. Through this process, they will develop self-esteem as a byproduct of those three “Cs.” Or another way to think about it is from Dr. Tom Nehmy, who uses the term *self-compassion* as a counter to “self-esteem.” Self-compassion is about how you treat yourself in times of challenge—something that transfers to how you treat others as well (<http://www.healthymindsprogram.com.au/school-program>).

But we think one of the most watered-down words in schools now is the word *bullying*. That’s why *Owning Up*, which technically is a bullying prevention program, doesn’t use the term in the lesson plans. We know that may seem odd, but after working throughout the country in all kinds of schools, we have received enough feedback that we are confident that framing these issues under the umbrella of bullying prevention is ineffective.

### **Confidentiality and Disclosures**

Establishing confidentiality and creating a safe space are essential for the program’s overall success. But in a limited way, we also want students to be allowed to share what they learned with their peers, parents, and other adults in their lives. Let them know that it’s okay to discuss things generally—what happened in class, topics that were addressed, how they felt about the information, and so forth—but that they need to leave out names and details. Explain that you expect confidentiality regarding what students say—what is said in the room stays in the room, and that includes not posting things on any form of social media.

Students may disclose painful personal experiences, such as bullying and forms of trauma. Inform your students that if someone discloses that they or someone else could

be in imminent physical danger, you and the student together will decide to report the problem to another adult to ensure they get the right support (meaning you're not going to immediately leave after the class and tell the principal or counselor without their knowledge). If a student reveals something painful in class, respond by saying, "I'm so sorry that happened to you, and we may need to do something about that. So let's set up a time after our session to figure out the best next steps." Your goal is to affirm the class but not to let the student's experience hijack the class. If the student reports to you privately (or when you meet with the student who spoke publicly), respond by saying, "I'm so sorry that happened to you, and thank you for placing your trust in me. What can I do that will support you right now in getting the help you need?" Make sure to ask the student if they currently feel safe. If not, you must report the abuse to the appropriate authorities. If the student does feel safe, ask whether they have talked to a counselor, and if not, offer to give them referral recommendations to get help. When a student discloses past abuse during a session, respond by saying, "I am so sorry that happened to you. Thank you for trusting all of us enough to talk about it here." You may also consider asking the student if they feel comfortable asking the other students how it feels to hear about their peer's experience.

It is also possible that students may disclose information that may not be accurate or true. When this happens, realize that these students are indicating that they have a problem (whether or not it is the problem they present) and that they still need help. Don't dismiss, or let others dismiss, the student as "just needing attention." It's a great opportunity to connect this dynamic back to the overall concept that dignity is not negotiable. As an educator, you should not be afraid of or intimidated by a disclosure—after all, you have created a safe environment where such disclosures can take place.

### **Snitching Versus Reporting**

Some students may feel conflicted about whether or not to help themselves or a friend when they're in trouble for fear that they'll be seen as a snitch. Tell your students that *Owning Up* may help them think through how to report a problem and to know the difference between "snitching" and reporting. Reporting has the best interests of the other person in mind and involves telling a trusted adult so the adult can help solve a problem that is bigger than you. Its goal is to right a wrong. Snitching, on the other hand, is not about helping; rather, it is telling on someone with the intention of getting that person in trouble. A person reports a problem with the intention of making it go away, while a person snitches with the intention of making someone's problems bigger or more public.

### **Family**

Understandably, parents can be curious about what will be taught in *Owning Up*. We are including a letter of introduction to parents and guardians for your use on page 145. It is critical to emphasize that parents and guardians should be informed of the general themes and goals of *Owning Up*. We want them to be part of the process. To that end, we believe the following is most important to communicate to the other adults in our students' lives:

1. We encourage students to discuss the themes we cover in the sessions with their parents and guardians.
2. We ask the students to respect the confidentiality of other students when they are telling another adult something about the session.
3. *Owning Up* educators are sensitive to the maturity level of the specific groups with which they work. *Owning Up* educators will not put words in their students' mouths.
4. If the parent, guardian, or another teacher has questions about the class, they are encouraged to speak with the *Owning Up* educator—we think there are countless opportunities to work together and reinforce positive messages to the young people in our lives.

## Discipline

*Owning Up* educators are in some way teaching a class, so inevitably keeping the group on track is critical. When students are talking over one another, some effective methods we use have been just to stop talking, wait for students to realize that you are waiting for them to get themselves focused, say “everyone focus on me” and then begin again. Try not to say, “Shhhh . . . everyone be quiet” or “Settle down, everyone—remember, only one person at a time,” or anything else teachers say that students regularly blow off. As a last resort, in the rare situation in which there is a group that is consistently disrespectful, we suggest you address them by saying, “In our guidelines, you asked me not treat you like you are 5 years old, but frankly, you are acting like a 5-year-old. I’m not enjoying being here with you. I love what I do, and I would like to be here with you, but not in this way.”

A note about fidgeting: Some students may need to doodle or hold something in order to think and speak clearly. Fidgeting is not a discipline issue if it’s not distracting the other students. This is especially true for young adolescents, who are growing rapidly and need to exert physical energy throughout the day. Rather than fight against this, find solutions. Allow students to doodle during discussions, and if you have a pen-tapper, let them tap on a mouse pad or other soft surface.

## Being Challenged by a Student

What do you do if one of your students disrupts the group or challenges you as the educator? This student will often challenge your authority in front of other students, who will watch for your response. This challenge will likely come across in one of three ways. The first involves a student who slouches in the back with complete indifference but still manages to suck up all the energy. The second is when a student directly challenges you by being disrespectful to you or the other students. The third, and sometimes the most difficult, is when a student acts as though he or she is your peer.

In all three situations, you should respond by establishing your authority as the educator without humiliating or “powering over” the student who is challenging you. This situation presents an opportunity to demonstrate the curriculum in action. Arrange to meet with the student after the session. Make it clear that you respect the student but will not tolerate their behavior—be specific about the unacceptable behavior and its

consequences. Acknowledge the student's position of power among his or her peers and reaffirm that you want the student in the group. If the behavior does not stop, make it clear that the student will have to leave. Depending on the severity of the problem, you may also choose to meet with the other members of the group. Depending on when you meet with them, you may have already covered the group dynamics session. If so, you can use that as a foundation for discussing the student's role in the group, and how their behavior is going against the class guidelines and what you want as a valued participant.

Maybe most challenging is preparing for the possibility that a student says something that is personally offensive to you or the other students. On one hand, *Owning Up* is about affirming every young person's right to "speak their truth." On the other hand, what happens if a student says a negative generalization based on race, class, gender orientation, sexual orientation, etc.? Your responsibility is to respectfully reaffirm the norms of the program that challenge these generalizations.

### **The Pack**

A group of students may challenge your authority by turning their chairs away, talking to each other, or bullying other students in the group. Immediately separate these students by moving them apart in the room. If the pack of students continues to be disruptive, you might identify the leader and meet with this student after the session to articulate your requirements for continued participation in the group. After listening to what the student has to say about the situation, name the behavior you object to and establish the goals you want to accomplish by meeting. Find out why the student is responding in that way and what the student wants from the program. You can then work together to write up a contract outlining what the student needs to do to return. The goal of the meeting is twofold: to communicate that you respect the student and want the student to be in the program, and to indicate that the current behavior must change as you have requested for the student to continue to participate. With the remainder of the pack, depending on the group dynamics, you can meet with them individually or in a group to articulate your expectations. With any and all of the students involved, it's essential to take steps to reconnect the relationships. So when you confront students about a negative behavior in a session, the next time you meet them you need to reach out to them in a positive way.

### **Maturity and Experience Level**

Your students will demonstrate a wide range of physical and emotional maturity. This dynamic can create a high degree of tension among students and may cause personal anxiety for students who worry if and how they fit in. Know that physical maturity can be a determinant of social status and individual placement in the social hierarchy. Sometimes students who are more physically or emotionally mature may have higher social status and power within the group. These students may, as a result, tend to dominate the discussion. At the other extreme, some physically mature students feel extremely uncomfortable with their bodies and will try to disappear into their clothes. As the educator, you need to be aware of these possible responses and incorporate this awareness into your strategy for creating opportunities for all students' participation.

## Getting Stuck

It's normal to get stuck sometimes while conducting the sessions. It's also normal for students to be defensive, shut down, claim that "these things don't happen at our school—we have our groups, but we're not mean," or believe that there's no hope in changing the problems they experience or see in their schools and communities. When faced with this challenging dynamic, we recommend that you give each student a sheet of paper and a pencil and let them sit by themselves wherever they want in the room (except near a close friend). Ask them to write, anonymously, about whether the students who voice these opinions reflect their own experiences and beliefs. Give them 5 to 10 minutes to answer, then collect the papers. Next, have all the students sit in a circle and look at the floor, not touching each other. Read their responses aloud, and then ask the students what it felt like to hear their peers' answers. In doing this exercise, you have two goals: The first is to break the class dynamic in which some students silence other students. The second is to give students a firsthand experience of what happens when some students speak for others, and promote the idea that each person's truth is equally valid.

## The *Owning Up* Community: You're Not Alone

No matter how much information we include on perceived challenges you might face while teaching *Owning Up*, we can't include everything. It could be a problem you experience teaching an activity, getting buy-in from colleagues and parents, or even logistical obstacles. Challenges like these can derail programs and undermine an educator's confidence and enthusiasm.

We believe great educators rely on reciprocal relationships with their colleagues. To that end, we have created the *Owning Up* Community to connect and encourage all of us to do our best work. We do not strive for uniformity but for unity because collaboration makes us stronger. The *Owning Up* Community will do this in the following ways:

- **Skill Sharing:** Share your favorite teaching tricks/tips/skills and tools with your friends and colleagues in friendly, no-pressure workalongs.
- **Coworking:** Get together to work on *Owning Up* lessons, help each other out, and share your work.
- **Build Community:** Meet new people in your field, organization, or community—and find out what we can do when we work together.
- **Join Us:** Use *Owning Up Online* to get help, talk about events, and share files.

We share ideas, meet with colleagues, and build community through the *Owning Up* Community. Join us there ([www.owningup.online](http://www.owningup.online)).

## Assessment

Assessing the program is an important part of the *Owning Up Curriculum* and plays a role in building community support, orienting community members and program educators, determining program effectiveness, and gauging student participation and learning.

To begin the program we have given you a series of questions as a “Community Assessment” tool to help you set the priorities for the program. We encourage you to do the Community Assessment (page 19) with all the people responsible for scheduling, supporting, and implementing *Owning Up*. You don’t have to answer all the questions, but still brainstorm together about the answers and why you are doing *Owning Up*. Creating community goals is critical. A second list of questions follows (page 20) and is directed at the individual educators who will be teaching *Owning Up*.

### **Measuring Program Effectiveness**

To evaluate the impact of the curriculum in your own setting, you can use the *Owning Up* pretest/posttest, included as Appendix A. Administer the evaluation to students before beginning the program as a pretest and then as soon as possible after the conclusion of the program as a posttest. A comparison between the pretest and posttest results may help you gauge general changes or trends in students’ attitudes as a result of their experience in the program.

It is also important to understand that the results of the surveys may vary depending on how many and which sessions you conduct. If possible, you should customize the surveys so that the questions reflect only the session content you intend to teach. You can also add questions about program logistics or how the educator conducted the sessions, if such feedback is desired.

### **Communicating With Families**

Appendices B through D provide materials helpful for school administrators in establishing social justice and communicating with families. The following items are meant as a starting place for developing more detailed plans to improve the school climate:

- Starting the School Year Right: How Do We Address Bullying at Our School?
- Letter to Parent or Guardian of a Child Who Is Bullying
- Letter From Parent or Guardian Whose Child Is Being Bullied

### **Organizing the Sessions**

*Owning Up* is designed to be taught on its own or integrated into a preexisting program. When it’s taught on its own, as in a social studies or health class, it’s usually taught once per week. If it’s taught in an advisory capacity, one session can cover multiple advisories.

### **Group Composition**

Group size is best between 10 and 25 students, but the sessions have been successfully taught with fewer or more students. The sessions have also been conducted with different grades together; however, we believe you have to be strategic about how you do that. For example, teaching sixth graders with eighth graders isn’t ideal because it’s just too hard to be appropriate for the sixth graders while being realistic for the eighth graders. Let’s get even more specific: Imagine teaching a class that covers this content with eighth-grade

girls in the same room as sixth-grade boys. It's fair to say that those groups of people live in two different worlds.

## Session Length

The time it takes to conduct each *Owning Up Curriculum* session generally ranges from 45 minutes to an hour and 20 minutes. Because we include several different types of activities in every session, many of the sessions would appear to take far longer to complete. Our belief is that you need the option to select various activities for different types of learners (auditory, visual, and kinesthetic, for example). And we don't think anyone, no matter their age or gender, learns most effectively by sitting in a chair throughout a class listening to someone lecture at them.

## Observers

If you are interested in having observers attend a session, or if people ask to attend, our suggestion is to limit it to two individuals, who sit at a distance from students. In addition, if you use another teacher's classroom and that person chooses to stay in the room (to observe, catch up on grading, etc.), it is of critical importance to articulate clear guidelines and expectations for that person before sessions begin. Specifically, if that teacher's presence makes the students unlikely to speak freely, the teacher should leave or you should find an alternative space.

## Materials and Media

Materials necessary to run the program are readily available in most schools and organizational settings. These include a board or flip chart, drawing paper and markers, writing paper and pens or pencils, and a computer with internet access. We also occasionally encourage students to use their own technology throughout the program to blog or search for information related to the topic. Educators in school-based settings should check the technology-use and video guidelines for the school and school system before asking students to engage with their own devices.

At various points in the sessions, students are also invited to write about the issues that have been raised. In addition to these structured opportunities, we encourage using journals throughout the program, however long the program runs. We encourage you to seek out videos that interest your own group to reinforce the curriculum's themes and stimulate discussion. You can refer to our website ([www.owningup.online](http://www.owningup.online)), where we will continue to provide recommendations for timely material.

## Using Art

We encourage you to use art—drawing, spoken word, or music—with your students, and we've included activities within the sessions you can use. Just be mindful about interpreting a student's artwork without his or her input, and to protect their art as if it is an extension of the student's body. If it's something they've made, ask for their permission before displaying it or sharing it with others, handle it with care, and store it in a safe place.

## Conclusion

*Owning Up* addresses extremely challenging issues in our society. While we all want our students to be safe and healthy, creating strategies that truly enable this to happen takes moral courage, perseverance, and commitment. As an individual responsible for the implementation of *Owning Up*, you are the cornerstone for its success in your community. You are teaching your students to treat themselves and others with dignity. You are teaching them to educate themselves about power and privilege, oppression, personal accountability, and bearing witness when others oppress and discriminate against those who have less power. You are empowering them to work as agents of positive change and influence in their lives and in the lives of others—and we have the utmost confidence that you will do a great job.

For additional materials, including handouts and links to other resources, please visit our website: [www.owningup.online](http://www.owningup.online)