

Naperville Youth **IN**clusion Ambassadors Newsletter (June 2022)

Equity, diversity, and inclusion are very important words to youth. Each person wants to be included, and people want to live in a world that is more diverse so that they can feel included. Everyone wants a seat at the table to help change the world. This is especially the case for youth. Throughout my life, I've seen youth try to make changes so their definitions of equity, diversity, and inclusion happen. Yet, I've seen many posts on social media sharing stories to make people aware their definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion are not happening.

Why is diversity, equity, and inclusion so important that youth take time out of their stressful days to protest for change? What is their definition of diversity, equity, and inclusion? I was able to ask teen and adult staff from Naperville's Operation Snowball that very question. Operation Snowball has the goal of creating an inclusive environment for teens to be themselves. I thought this diverse group of 27 teens and adults would be the perfect people to ask these questions.

When it came to their definitions, they all struggled for a minute. The teens' definitions were similar. They all said DEI is, "A broad group of people working together towards a goal." They also thought it meant, "Accepting people for who they are." For the most part, the teens I interviewed did not know that equity, diversity, and inclusion have separate definitions. This tells me that youth need greater education in this area.

As to why diversity, equity, and inclusion are important, the teens had a much easier time answering that question. I believe it's because youth try hard to make the world a better place by making sure that everyone has a place at the table. A lot of the teens I interviewed said they believe diversity, equity, and inclusion are important because it empowers the ability to treat others more equitably. They also said that "our generation is still growing," and DEI "creates new lessons for a better future and a stronger generation." Diego Jimenez was one of the teens I interviewed. Diego is a teen staffer with Snowball. He shared a quote by Tara Westover, wherein she says, "the distinction of connections made and lessons learned in school do more than educate them; they educate them on who they are as an individual." Diego said that his school doesn't provide space to have a conversation on diversity and inclusion. Yet, he, along with all the teens, believes, "Inclusion is a conversation that connects individuals together to form a better community."

The adults I interviewed have tried to make that conversation a reality for our teens in Naperville. For example, Mr. Matt Walker, an adult Snowball staffer and a counselor at Waubonsie Valley High School, allows teens to be open when he meets with them. He said, "In my work, I reach out to students to encourage them to use their voice, and I try to provide a space where students can speak about things that they are afraid to in other places." I believe having adults like Matt in our community allows youth to have these tough conversations to make real change in the world today.

The Naperville Youth **IN**clusion Ambassadors also gives youth a safe place to have conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion. Our goals are to be ambassadors of inclusion and to model true community. I have learned about so many perspectives on the topic of diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout the time I've been part of the Naperville Youth **IN**clusion Ambassadors. This group is so important to Naperville because according to Ken Davis, another adult staffer with Operation Snowball I interviewed, "Youth inherit and can influence the future; it will benefit them to drive the changes they feel are important." This group has and will make the changes so that youth can get their definition of inclusion to become foundational in the city they call home.

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