

Naperville Youth INclusion Ambassadors Newsletter (November 2022)

The Power of Inclusion – A Youthful Perspective

Inclusion: we hear the word often, but what does it really mean? If we as a Naperville community are striving to create an environment in which all individuals feel included, we must first know what this truly entails. As Youth INclusion Ambassadors, we are committed to attaining this inclusive community, and we feel it is part of our responsibility to help define this ever so important term. To do so, we looked to our peers.

The input of students in this effort is crucial. We are the ones in the classroom and dining at Naperville establishments; existing in our city. A perceptive group of eyes and ears in Naperville, our youth are well aware of the realities in our community, and not afraid to share them. So, I asked them. What does inclusion mean to you?

An established leader in the Naperville North High School community, Senior Nadira Montague, president of North's Black Student Leadership Association, shared with me her own definition of inclusion.

“Inclusion to me ties into belonging...being inclusive or feeling included is just reaching out to somebody in a sense, making sure that everybody feels like they have a place in something,” Montague said. For her, inclusion wasn't just the availability of resources that promote community-wide belonging, but a true commitment to the knowledge that those resources have been made available, widely.

Layla Henderson, NNHS student and Vice President of Student Government, discussed what inclusion means to her. “To me, inclusion means being supported and loved and always knowing that I have someone there for me. I feel it comes a lot from the sports I play and my circle of friends,” said Henderson.

For most students, this sentiment rings true. A community with a strong sense of inclusion is one in which all individuals, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or other factors like religion, feel like they belong. Inclusion reinforces the message that whether it be through sports, social circles, city wide events or representation amongst community leaders, you have a place in this community. In order for Naperville to maintain an environment in which there is room for all to belong, we must make the space.

For NNHS student Isabella Ferak, Co-President of the Feminist Round Table at NNHS, inclusion meant the guarantee of three main protective factors, all working to ensure belonging. “Having a seat at the table, being treated as an equal, and feeling comfortable enough to voice your individual thoughts and opinions,” said Ferak.

Akash Bansal, another Naperville student and Student Government member, believes that inclusion has a lot to do with representation and the sentiment of community. “Including all people in one group, from various backgrounds and identities, and having representation for all...I think that inclusion doesn't allow anyone to feel alone,” said Bansal.

The valuable insight from some of the youth of Naperville helps us to better define the word inclusion, while simultaneously conveying that additional efforts are necessary for all to feel welcome.

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