



Operation Respect: Don't Laugh at Me  
2 Penn Plaza 23<sup>rd</sup> Floor New York, NY 10121

Dear Colleague,

Violence among the children of America has presented teachers and school administrators with a grave crisis, but also an important opportunity. Violence, such as the tragic killings at Columbine High School, has alerted us to the imperative of identifying and addressing this crisis at its source; not only to root out violence, but to evolve a more compassionate classroom environment that also nurtures academic growth and achievement. Recent studies confirm that one of the primary causes of violence among children is peer disrespect, or “dissing.” Fear, hurt and anger, springing from the wounds of ridicule and bullying by other children, can translate into severe emotional pain as well as depression, violence and, in extreme cases, suicide.

The hopeful news is that when social and emotional learning, and character education, programs are introduced into the classroom, they have proved to be highly effective tools for creating a safe, nurturing classroom environment. “Don’t Laugh At Me” and other programs like it, which use tested classroom techniques and pedagogy can, over time, move classrooms toward the elimination of ridicule, bullying, intolerance and name-calling. These, and other forms of disrespect, can damage the spirit and vitality of students, seriously diminishing their ability to concentrate and productively engage in classroom work.

We are aware that the stress and strain on those of you who have to deal with the daunting emotional problems of victims and perpetrators of such behavior can, understandably, diminish your ability to teach, and deplete your morale, no matter how dedicated and skillful an educator you are. We sympathize with the difficulties you face as you work hard to raise academic performance even as you try to cope with a class whose spirit is sometimes fragmented by troubled students’ behavior and eroded by a climate of disrespect.

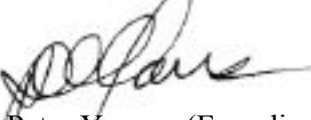
The reality is that the introduction of social and emotional learning and character education programs will, ultimately, not steal time from teaching essential academic skills. On the contrary, we believe that – not immediately, but within a few weeks – the introduction of social and emotional learning and character education programs, if well-implemented, will noticeably begin to bind your class together in mutual, determined endeavor, nurturing a spirit of humanity and compassion and simultaneously accelerate the personal, emotional, ethical and academic growth of your students.

In short, although it will not take place overnight, we urge you to embrace “Don’t Laugh At Me” and other such programs and trust that, as the fresh spirit and harmony in your class increases, so will its academic performance and your own personal rewards from teaching, that you so richly deserve.

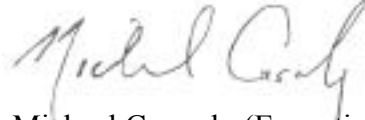
We hope that this recommendation will not be viewed simply as a wearying demand, adding to your already overflowing plate. Hopefully, when you watch the three-and-a-half minute “Don’t Laugh At Me” video at the beginning of the VHS tape, you will be moved and inspired, as we were, and you will recognize that this project can potentially provide an important avenue for creating a new, more compassionate, classroom dynamic.

Utilizing this and other such programs, we hope to initiate a partnership of efforts that will engage all of us; teachers, principals, school administrators and counselors – as we advance an educational initiative that can truly meet the crisis of violence head-on, while it simultaneously addresses the academic needs of students, giving them the tools to become whole, productive human beings; responsible, humane, ethical, participating members of our democracy and our society.

Good luck and warmest regards,



Peter Yarrow (Founding Director)  
Don't Laugh At Me / Operation Respect, Inc.



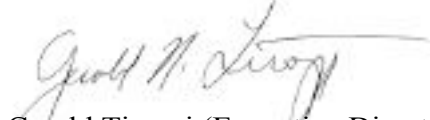
Michael Casserly (Executive Director)  
Council of the Great City Schools



Vincent Ferrandino (Executive Director)  
National Association of Elementary School Principals



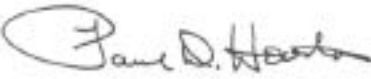
Richard Wong (Executive Director)  
American School Counselors Association



Gerald Tirozzi (Executive Director)  
National Association of Secondary School Principals



Anne Bryant (Executive Director)  
National School Boards Association



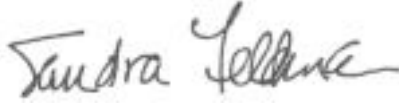
Paul Houston (Executive Director)  
American Association of School Administrators



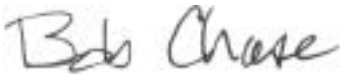
Sue Swaim (Executive Director)  
National Middle School Association



Philip Rusche (Chair)  
Council of Great City Colleges of Education



Sandra Feldman (President)  
American Federation of Teachers



Bob Chase (President)  
National Education Association

P. S. Having shared all this with you, we must introduce a cautionary note before advising you to launch “Don't Laugh At Me” in your classroom. A certain amount of background in social and emotional learning, particularly in the area of conflict resolution, is crucial to the successful implementation of the “Don't Laugh At Me” curriculum. Since preparation for teaching does not always require experience in these areas, some of you may feel unprepared to begin using “Don't Laugh At Me.” If you are enthusiastic about introducing the project into your classroom, but feel that you need a stronger educational foundation in this area, we urge you to wait a semester or two before starting, while you pursue such further professional development. Please contact any of our organizations for such resources.