

# Safe Spaces Resource

A Guide for Michigan Educators

*Created by the Michigan  
Department of Education  
Student Advisory Council*



# Michigan State Board of Education

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## Safe Spaces Resource Acknowledgments

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Many students worked on these ideas, either as a part of the Student Advisory Council or not, over the last 3-1/2 years. Those represented below are the young people who worked on synthesizing the early work into this final document, who were given the option to be listed in this acknowledgement section, and who chose to accept this small acknowledgement. Many more students than noted below participated in some way in the development and expression of these ideas. Those who wanted to be listed chose how their name would appear so that their privacy could be maintained and are listed below.

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# Introduction

## The Michigan Department of Education Student Advisory Council and the *Safe Spaces Resource*

In July 2020, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) created the Student Advisory Council in search of student input. The Student Advisory Council is composed of students from across the state who met virtually for 3 years as writers, editors, fact finders, and designers to create this resource. The Student Advisory Council *Safe Spaces Resource* is a document created to help guide the establishment, utilization, and understanding of safe spaces in middle and high schools.

The MDE and the Student Advisory Council found this document necessary because students have expressed that there is a lack of comfortable environments in schools. According to [StopBullying.gov](https://www.stopbullying.gov), a website managed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, more than 70% of students admitted to seeing bullying in their school. Bullying makes school extremely difficult as students can be made to feel isolated or experience other negative feelings. This resource serves as a guide to alleviate some of the pain and hardship Michigan students face by providing them with an opportunity to heal, grow, learn, and connect.

By the end of this document, educators should have a detailed understanding of safe spaces, their importance, and how to create them at their respective schools. Consulting this resource is the first step of many that can be taken to make schools more welcoming, comfortable, and beneficial for all.

## Safe Spaces

A “safe space” is a term used to describe an environment where people can feel comfortable, supported, believed, and understood. Safe spaces commonly exist as groups that gather together on a scheduled basis to hold discussions and strive toward completing goals. No one should feel judged, excluded, or hurt in a safe environment. The purpose of a safe space is to support those struggling and provide a reliable environment where people know they can receive help. Many safe spaces also aim for betterment of the community regarding the topics addressed.

Critical issues such as racism, sexism, homophobia, or classism may exacerbate mental health struggles. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's *2022 KIDS COUNT® Data Book*, 242,000 Michigan children are struggling with depression or anxiety.<sup>1</sup> Creating a safe environment enables children and teenagers to receive much needed support regarding struggles in their daily life that contribute to poor mental health. This is especially true for groups of people linked by a common purpose, ideology, interest, or identity—known as affinity groups.

People linked by a common purpose, ideology, interest, or identity are known as **affinity groups**.

Safe spaces are designed to give students a time and place to speak freely and have difficult conversations. While this resource mainly focuses on race and racism in schools, it can be applied to other topics as well. Depending on the school, multiple safe spaces can be created to go more in-depth with each affinity group.

Safe spaces are meant to connect communities and show students that they are not alone. During the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, many teens faced social isolation. Connecting students with each other fosters friendships, growth, and community participation. It also helps students understand their own identity. Safe spaces provide the opportunity for people to reflect on their past experiences and discuss these experiences with others who understand and may relate.

While safe spaces are meant to be comfortable and trustworthy for students opening up about struggles, they are also meant to be uplifting and positive. The goal is to move forward and improve how we react to future learning experiences. It is important to focus on the successes and celebrations as well as the struggles and challenges that students face.

Safe spaces can be categorized in two ways:

1. **Supportive:** Environments that allow students to express their thoughts and experiences while connecting with their classmates and educators.
2. **Active:** Environments in which students act within their community to create a more inclusive educational experience.

While these spaces are open to everyone, it should also be noted that marginalized students should be prioritized and heard.

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<sup>1</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2022). *2022 kids count data book*. <https://www.aecf.org/resources/2022-kids-count-data-book>

## Safe Space Initiative Examples



### **Presenting student-created lessons**

- Social justice issues
- Heritage months
- How other students can be involved in the safe space or related projects



### **Attending and/or contributing to school board meetings**



### **Creating a social media account**

- To promote safe spaces group activities
- To reach out to the student body
- To spread awareness on issues the group discusses



### **Addressing issues the safe spaces group has identified by**

- Meeting with administration
- Sharing educational materials with the student body
- Creating posters, bulletin boards, and social media posts

Safe spaces can be separate or combined depending on the needs and wants of students in your school. Each group will look different, and to be effective, should be tailored to the students in your community.

## ***Safe Spaces Resource Chapters***

Each chapter in this resource represents a critical part of creating an effective safe space. The chapters should be consulted and understood to encourage productive safe spaces.

Each chapter follows a similar structure, identifying “what” is discussed, “why” it is important, and “how” to create safe spaces. Accompanying each chapter are guiding questions on each priority.

The chapters in this resource are as follows:

1. [Establish the Purpose and Determine Who Participates](#)
2. [Prioritize and Establish Authentic Relationships](#)
3. [Create and Use Safe Space Agreements](#)
4. [Provide Opportunities for Dialogue](#)
5. [Determine Logistics of Meetings](#)
6. [Establish Roles](#)
7. [Celebrate Success](#)

# Chapter 1

## Establish the Purpose and Determine Who Participates

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### WHAT

The first step in establishing a safe space is determining its purpose as a supportive or active group. The purpose of a supportive group is to foster an environment that allows students to express their thoughts and experiences while connecting with their classmates and educators. On the other hand, the purpose of an active group is for students to create a more inclusive educational community.

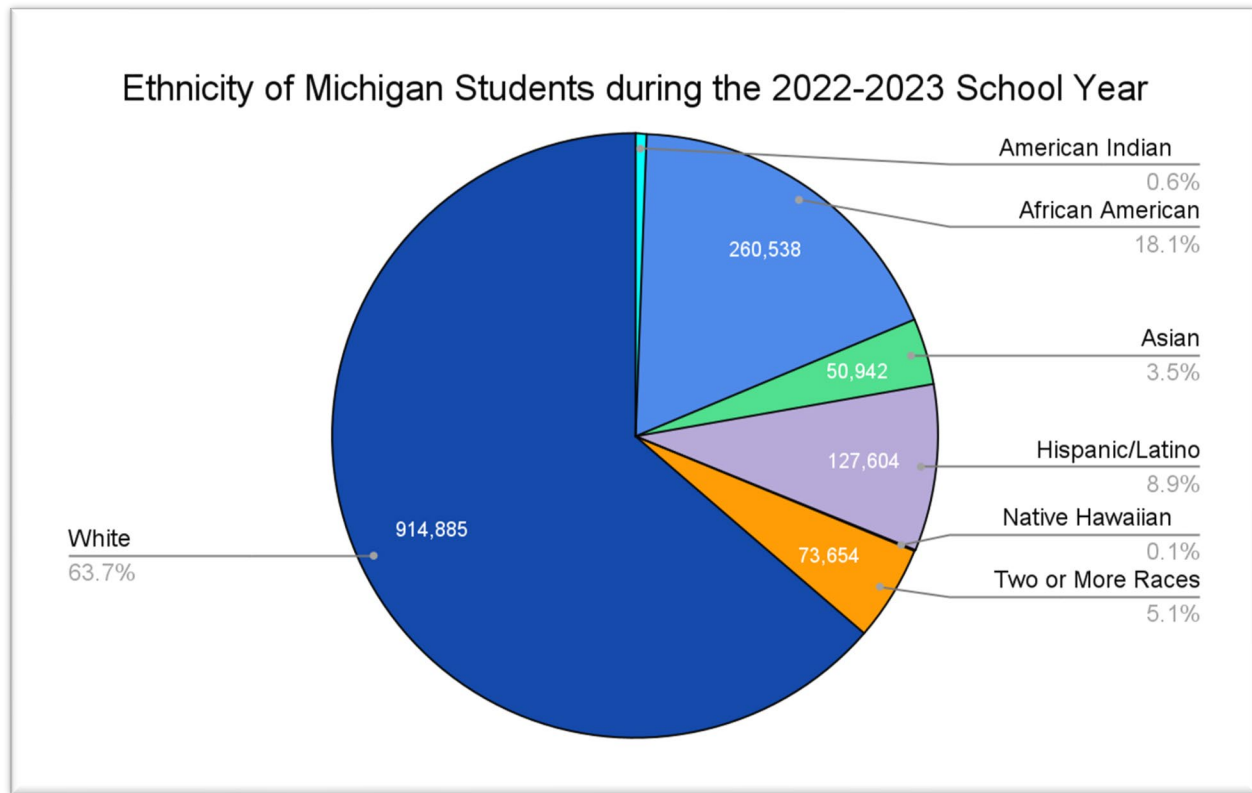
The second step, which can be difficult, is determining who should be involved in the discussions that take place in a safe space. It is important to remember that although we most often refer to a safe space as a place for discussions on racism, safe spaces may also include conversations on other forms of oppression or mental health challenges. Ideally, safe spaces are designed with everyone being able to participate, whether that is to share, learn, support, or take action—everyone can benefit. This should involve students, teachers, and staff to improve the school environment.

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### WHY

Safe spaces like this can serve two purposes; the first being a place for students to find support from others with similar experiences or characteristics in an affinity group. As seen in the pie chart below, during the 2022–2023 school year 63.7% of Michigan's students identified as white. Many students of color can feel isolated or otherwise uncomfortable as ethnic minorities in their communities and benefit from safe spaces in which to share experiences and support one another. The second purpose is for diverse groups to make change in their community. This can be done by learning more about any issue at hand, sharing their experiences, and deepening their understanding of social matters. These two purposes make safe spaces beneficial for all because they allow students to have a community where they feel supported and comfortable, while also hearing different perspectives that inspire them to become involved, provide support, and be better allies to those struggling with race and the issue of racism.





## HOW

The two purposes of safe spaces—for support and taking action—could be used together or separately depending on the school. The support group would include students who share similar experiences (regarding race, culture, sexuality) and can learn from each other's stories while sharing their own. On the other hand, members who want to take action would focus on implementing allyship within communities. It is also important to note that these safe spaces will vary within every school. The resources provided are mainly a guide to follow; they should be tailored to fit each school's distinct needs. It's important to have people of different backgrounds involved for students to explore and discuss commonalities. This will allow individuals to listen, learn, and work together to improve school communities.

In supportive spaces, leaders are advised to provide resources for students (following this document or further independent research) to diversify and develop student dialogue. This can help guide students to have nuanced conversations and develop a deep understanding of each other to build empathy and provide ample support. Support can take the form of spaces for students to meet, facilitation for meetings and discussions, directions for conflict mediation, or social-emotional guidance.



In active spaces, leaders are advised to provide resources for students to get involved in the community. This can take a number of forms including compiling school board meeting dates, resources for local or community news, or local organizations/events students can participate in to use their voices.

### Guiding Questions

- What issues are present in our school community?
- What is the purpose of our safe space?
- Who could benefit from our safe space?
- How can students share experiences and feel supported?
- What are ways safe spaces can be used to improve our school?
- How can the idea of safe spaces be promoted in our school?

## Chapter 2

### Prioritize and Establish Authentic Relationships

#### WHAT

After establishing the purpose of the safe space and who will be a part of the space, the next step is building trust. Prioritizing and establishing an authentic relationship with students means going beyond textbook norms. These relationships consist of mutual respect and trust between students and staff. This trust will encourage students to ask for help and receive guidance.

Authentic relationships allow students to feel comfortable with teachers. It entails educators becoming more approachable so students feel at ease in a school environment. These relationships should be personal and adjusted for each student's unique personality to make each feel comfortable.



#### WHY

Establishing authentic relationships is necessary because when a student has an issue in their life, they need a comfortable space to go to and share. Using basic methods of trust in classrooms can help further impactful discussions. These methods of trust have been recognized to work effectively by researchers and educators alike. In *Exploring Equity Issues: Facilitating Race Talk in the Classroom*, research scientist Jasmine Williams wrote, “Establishing

“I know that many students have benefitted by having a designated safe space in the building where they know they can go, no matter what, and be safe.”

— Michigan High School Teacher

trust and mutual respect amongst members of the classroom is an important first step to laying the foundation for effective race talk. Students should feel psychologically safe—in the sense that one’s identities, perspectives, and contributions are valuable—within the learning environment.”<sup>2</sup> Trust is vital among students and staff to have effective safe spaces.

As one Michigan high school teacher noted, “I know that many students have benefitted by having a designated safe space in the building where they know they can go, no matter what, and be safe. I have had many students (who didn’t actually have me as a teacher) use my room for this purpose throughout the years.”

## HOW

The key to engaging in meaningful and helpful relationships between students and educators is vulnerability—on both ends. For a student to grow and thrive in a learning environment, they must feel comfortable opening up to an educator. For this to happen, educators need to foster the right environment and this may come in the form of offering their own vulnerabilities or experiences. Staff need to be able to connect with students. It is important to be patient and understanding with one another. Additionally, teachers and staff should be willing to listen to students and engage with them, which may mean going out of their comfort zone.

### Examples of Vulnerability in Student–Teacher Relationships:

- ✓ Share personal hardships to encourage others to share their own experiences
- ✓ Put yourself out there to build an open environment
- ✓ Share in a mindful manner
- ✓ Treat conflicting opinions/experiences with respect
- ✓ Give students space to talk but don’t force them into conversation

<sup>2</sup> Williams, J. D. (2018). *Exploring equity issues: Facilitating race talk in the classroom: Lessons from student experiences* (p. 3). MAEC Center for Education Equity. <https://maec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Exploring-Equity-Facilitating-Race-Talk-in-the-Classroom.pdf>

This can be done by recognizing commonalities between students and staff, despite being at different points in life. Teachers and students can connect through their usual activities and day-to-day interactions, or by incorporating other structured activities such as carving out time for small talk, offering one-on-one support, or hosting a safe space dialogue.

It is important to note that teachers should not force bonds; they should instead be created naturally and comfortably. Teachers know students are comfortable and confident when they start to see more people share their experiences. As time goes on, there will be a noticeable change in the environment.

“Knowing I can be around someone/people who I know won’t judge me for just being me helps me realize it’s okay to show my emotions and just be myself.”

– Michigan High School Student

## Guiding Questions

These important questions can help you forge a better safe space for your students.

- How are students sharing and participating when speaking with you?
- How do you help students feel a sense of belonging?
- What evidence is there that your students feel seen and listened to?
- What are ways you can be vulnerable with your students to build trust?

# Chapter 3

## Create and Use Safe Space Agreements

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### WHAT

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As staff and students start to build authentic relationships to support the safe space, we recommend that all the participants work together to craft a safe space agreement. The agreement is a sort of guide for resolving issues. It lists the expected norms or social contracts unique to each safe space developed by its members.

These agreements should be created by everyone within the group. Creating the agreement together gives safe space members a chance to connect and to set important boundaries. The topics at hand may cause students to feel vulnerable, which is why safe space agreements are important: to maintain a supportive environment.

### Sample Safe Space Contract

- Respect and validate others' experiences and feelings
- Be an active and respectful listener
- Be inclusive and welcoming
- Maintain privacy and trust
- Always be kind
- Establish and respect boundaries
- Address conflicts or offenses educationally and without judgment
  - "Ouch, Oops, Educate" (Elaborated on below)
- Be open-minded and flexible

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### WHY

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Safe space agreements in your individual schools are used to hold people accountable and handle difficulties. The creation and implementation of the agreements are reliant on trust between teachers and students. People are more likely to follow the agreements if they build them together. Agreements also help students respect each other and help build trust between peers.



When establishing your safe space agreements, all members must follow them, staff and students alike. Being vulnerable and open to any discussion will encourage students to participate, allowing them to feel more comfortable, and will ensure that students respectfully follow the safe space agreements. It is also important that each member listens and provides a chance for everyone to speak. No student should have their experiences invalidated or fear being judged. Leaders should ensure that this is the reality in the safe space; when they model the expectations established, the students will reciprocate.

When establishing safe space agreements, all members must follow them, staff and students alike.



## HOW

Students and adults can collectively make a list of expectations for the teacher, one another, and themselves. It is important to be flexible when creating your safe space and, most importantly, to hear everyone's input. The process of creating norms should be an interactive experience, where students lead the conversation and teachers offer support. These conversations should be fluid

but never forced; the environment should be welcoming and open to any ideas—or lack thereof. One way to formulate safe space agreements is breaking up into small groups, brainstorming a list of possible agreements and then sharing them out with the whole group to condense them into one list. A good



way to keep track of the norms is to use a poster or an online document that can be viewed by all. Review and remind people about the agreements when in the safe space. If an agreement is broken, it is important to call it out right away to prevent further occurrences. The social contract can be a working document throughout the year so that conflicts can be addressed and new ideas can be incorporated as well.

For ideas and inspiration, students can meet to brainstorm in small groups, then share out in the large group for a final product. This can take place in a variety of ways, depending on what best suits the members of the safe space. Guiding questions can be used to direct and promote the flow of ideas.

Staff members should speak about how to respond to disagreements in their safe space. Throughout the process of engaging your safe space, there will be times when someone says something that is deemed offensive or wrong. It is important to address the individual's offensive language in a way that is *respectful*; everyone in the safe space is there to learn.

One vital safe space agreement is to educate people respectfully and without judgment. When doing so, it is always great to follow the **"Ouch, Oops, Educate"** principle. This is an agreement that allows members to inform individuals when they say or do something offensive. It provides guidance on how to respond in a validating and educational way so the group can build trust and rapport. Here is what each part of the method means:

- **Ouch** – When a student or staff member says something offensive, it is extremely important to hold that person accountable by identifying the harmful nature of what was said. This way, everyone feels safe knowing that similar offenses are less likely to happen.
- **Oops** – If someone says "ouch" to what you've said, it is crucial that you reevaluate your statement and acknowledge their feelings. It's important to keep an open mind without getting defensive. If you recognize that what you said is wrong, apologize. Hold yourself accountable and vocalize your intentions to not do or say such things in the future. It is this growth mindset that leads to progress.
- **Educate** – This step may be the most important of all. Respectfully inform the individual of exactly what they said that was offensive and why. It is crucial to note that tone is important in these situations and that the group intends to purely inform the individual of their offense(s) and use a judgment-free tone. Discuss why what they said was harmful and use outside resources when appropriate.

Incorporating this method into the safe space agreements may benefit everyone in the discussion.

Another way to deal with disagreements in your safe space is to use sentence starters. Sentence starters help students respectfully inform someone, refute a statement, get more information on a topic, or agree with someone.

Here are some sentence starters that may prove to be helpful for your safe space:

- "I have to disagree with \_\_\_\_\_ because ..."



- “What did you mean by \_\_\_\_\_?”
- “From my perspective ... ”
- “In what I’ve seen ... ”
- “I was hurt when \_\_\_\_\_ because ... ”
- “I agree with \_\_\_\_\_ because ... ”
- “I’m confused when you say \_\_\_\_\_. Can you elaborate?”
- “\_\_\_\_\_’s point was important because ...”
- “Adding to what \_\_\_\_\_ said, ...”

As one Michigan high school student described, “In order to create an accepting, honest, and truly safe space, we make sure every member understands and agrees that respect is the most important value in our safe space. There must be respect between the adult leader and students, and among the students. We discuss our social norms and goals at the start of every year, and typically at the start of every meeting. Respect for one another is reinforced through frequent discussion and by holding each other accountable. Our group is solidified with trust in each other because we follow our agreements, which leads to more comfort in contributing to discussions.”

“In order to create an accepting, honest, and truly safe space, we make sure every member understands and agrees that respect is the most important value in our safe space.”

— Michigan High School Student

## Guiding Questions

Adult leaders can introduce guidelines to the students by sharing the guiding questions below.

- How should students treat each other in this safe space?
- How do teachers respect students and vice versa in this safe space?
- How do students and teachers work together to build a comfortable environment?
- How do we manage disagreements that happen in this safe space?

# Chapter 4

## Provide Opportunities for Dialogue

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### WHAT

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Once the foundation of the safe space has been created, it is time to focus on what goes on within the meeting. One aspect of what happens in meetings is conversation. It is important for students and adult leaders to agree on what the conversations will sound like in this setting to have productive and helpful meetings.

There are multiple ways to hold conversation, and safe spaces require extra care. The purpose of a safe space is not to argue or win but rather to talk openly and work cooperatively. Dialogue in safe spaces needs to focus on broadening perspectives, not arguing or chatting. To achieve consistently meaningful dialogue, safe space conversations should have structure.

To get the most out of the conversation, start by choosing a topic that the safe space members find relatable. Creating shared meaning brings clarity and engagement for students.

Before starting the dialogue, encourage students to reflect on their own identities and the perspectives of those around them. This will help students be familiar with each other and learn how to respect each other.

After establishing a topic and recognizing the diversity within the safe space, the group is able to have brave conversations. Dialogue is honest and respectful and allows the students to talk meaningfully about topics such as injustice and prejudice.

Lastly, the members should commit to *continue* to dialogue—in future safe space meetings or in their everyday life.

Dialogue will look different in every school, but the structure is still the same. For example, here are two safe spaces with different goals that both engage in productive dialogue.

### Activism

The established goal of an active safe space is to find solutions to school or community issues. In this setting, dialogue brings diverse perspectives by involving many students and adults. Therefore, it is important to have an open mind while sharing opinions and to also have structured conversation to reach goals. Effective communication is necessary because it allows people to share ideas and work together to solve problems without judgment or conflict.

## Support

The established goal of this safe space is for students to find empathy and compassion with one another. There is still dialogue here—as students come together with shared experience and hold respectful conversations. The dialogue’s focus is on reassurance and comfort, and it is equally important to stay on this theme of listening and supporting as it is to give advice.

Understanding your safe space’s goals will guide what your dialogue looks like.

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## WHY

Providing groups with opportunities for dialogue creates a comfortable and welcoming atmosphere for students to share their experiences and opinions. This will allow for future discussions in the safe space. Dialogue is a focused conversation where leaders keep students on one topic. Dialogue sessions are essential because they can productively inform students about certain topics they may not be educated about or comfortable discussing. Also, dialogues can keep students engaged because most of the topics discussed are impacting the world today and, even more so, the students themselves.

Furthermore, a discussion can be structured with certain strategies to have the most meaningful conversation. For example, by starting off with a relatable topic and expanding from a common understanding, students will be able to build on their knowledge with that specific subject. Additionally, having dialogue in small groups can make students more comfortable sharing thoughts about topics such as race or racism.

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## HOW

Effective communication requires a general topic or area of focus for each discussion. The process for selecting a topic can vary, including guidance from advisors, a vote from students, or a specialized student leader group. Students are encouraged to select the topic to ensure the safe space is being used effectively.

Once the dialogue is in motion, consider reviewing the safe space agreements set in place. It doesn’t have to take a long time, but it will help keep participants thoughtful and engaged in the conversation, respectfully and sincerely.



Dialogue facilitation can look different with a number of factors, including the discussion topic, participation, activities, and more. However, students should have a leading role in facilitating the safe space and dialogue opportunities so that everyone feels comfortable sharing and students can feel more at ease and involved.

Maintaining flow in the conversation is imperative to student participation and growth. This means that while there should be a set topic or agenda for each discussion, students are open to talk and take the conversation in any direction—while keeping it safe, inclusive, and kind. The open discussion of difficult topics can help to destigmatize them and aid productivity.

It is important that these dialogue opportunities are presented clearly and plainly while being encouraging and effective. This might include providing multiple opportunities for dialogue through different mediums (written, spoken, or submitted). Students should be encouraged and welcomed to share their thoughts or ask questions at any point.

- **Conversation Flow**

Time should be spent discussing what students value to make them feel welcomed and appreciated. Conversations should be relaxed in nature and not forced so that both students and teachers are more comfortable. Discussions should be open so all ideas are considered and valued.

- **Student-Led Environment**

These conversations would be student-led with occasional guidance from adult leaders. This makes students feel heard and like their voices matter. Adult leader guidance would ensure that the conversation is beneficial and on topic.

- **Ideas/Inspiration**

Students can meet to brainstorm in small groups, then share out in the large group for a final product. This can take place in a variety of ways, depending on what best suits the members of the safe space. Guiding questions can be used to direct and promote the idea flow.

## School Listening Sessions

The Student Advisory Council conducted “listening tours” at three different high schools to find out more about how safe spaces look in the real world. We interviewed different students and adults for more information. Below is some insight into three Michigan High School Safe Spaces.

### High School Example 1

- **How would you encourage students to participate and speak out?** Small groups help; if people are not comfortable sharing with the whole group, they might be willing to share with one or two individuals.
- **How do you know students are comfortable?** A student shared that after a few meetings they started to see more people sharing and demonstrating comfort and confidence. One new student shared that they are definitely more comfortable building relationships based on the things the group has in common. Another new student shared that although other students in the safe space group come from different backgrounds, they all share common experiences.
- **What core values were shared from adult leaders?** We want to diffuse negative stereotypes, have brave and honest conversations about race and disparities, and teach our peers and community how to counter racism and discrimination.

### High School Example 2

- **How do you build the relationships between the students and the staff members?** Adults build relationships with students by explicitly talking to students about student concerns/problems.

### High School Example 3

- **How do you make sure all student voices are heard?** By giving people tools that will enable them to express themselves in a setting that's comfortable to them. If we come across a particular issue, I have them fill out a Google form, which would provide data I could use. This allows responses and feedback to be projected anonymously, giving everyone a chance to express themselves equally. A teacher added that if some members don't feel comfortable sharing verbally, they have the choice to draw an image. Then they can share with a partner, then share in a small group, then share with the full group.

## Guiding Questions

A more effective dialogue can be held with prompts or questions on the topic for students to share their thoughts on. These might include, but are not limited to the following.

- What would you like to add?
- How would you respond if ... ?
- What might be another perspective on this?

- What does this remind you of?
- Has anyone had an experience where ... ?

Student feedback and thoughts can also be gathered with prompt questions. This can help gauge the effectiveness of the safe space and identify any changes that might need to be made. These questions can include, but are not limited to the following.

- What do you like or dislike about safe spaces?
- If you could change anything about the discussion/safe space, what would it be?
- What would you like to see moving forward?

# Chapter 5

## Determine Logistics of Meetings

### WHAT

The value of a safe space is clear, but *what* this space looks like may be hard to visualize. A safe space can be compared to any other club or extracurricular activity: a group of students with similar interests or experiences that create meaningful meetings. All the components of school clubs are necessary in a safe space, such as:

- Adult leaders
- Communication with school administration
- An established meeting location
- Consistent meeting times
- Productive and engaging agendas
- Following school guidelines regarding guardian involvement







**Adult leaders** are individuals who will implement the safe space, involve students, guide conversation, and lead meetings when necessary. Educators, counselors, and school staff are encouraged to become adult leaders, but community volunteers may also be involved, per school guidelines.

**Communication with school administration** is necessary to establish any extracurricular activities, including safe spaces. There may be specific requirements or steps to create a club, like the number of students, adult leadership, and so forth. This may vary based on the school and district. School administration can also be a valuable resource to encourage students to join the safe space. Find prospective safe space members through loudspeaker announcements, newsletter/newspaper announcements, email blasts, club fairs, and so on.

**An established meeting location** will make safe space discussions or activities more efficient and consistent. Potential locations are classrooms, libraries, and conference rooms. The meeting location should be approved by administration and communicated when advocating for the safe space.

**Consistent meeting times** will increase student involvement, since students know when and where the safe space is held. Although a safe space may be a casual place, it requires



organization and consistency to accomplish goals and keep students engaged. Meeting times should be agreed on by all members to ensure the goals and progress are being met.

**Productive and engaging agendas** include the goals and objectives of the safe space. They will vary in different safe spaces, but it is important to have one. After referring back to Chapter 3 (Create and Use Safe Space Agreements) with the students, keep the group on task, staying focused on the goals, and check to make sure the safe space's agenda reflects the members' needs.

As stated in the *Guiding Principles of Michigan's Top 10 Strategic Education Plan*, "Families and communities are essential partners of teachers, support staff, and administrators in the education of students." Safe spaces should follow school guidelines regarding guardian involvement to improve communication between the school and students' families.

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## WHY

A strong foundation, established and maintained by adult and student leaders, will strengthen safe space meetings over time. The objective of a safe space isn't to create rigid rules and limit discussion, but a degree of organization is necessary. Safe spaces are comfortable environments to discuss uncomfortable topics, so it's important that those conversations do happen. Each school has a unique student body with different needs to be addressed in the safe space, such as celebration of cultures; sharing experiences with racism, homophobia, or prejudice; education on inclusivity; or advocacy for a social concern.

It is vital to create a structure, schedule, or some form of organization to develop the safe space as a reliable and effective resource. This will encourage students to make the most of the safe space and support a full range of benefits. Having a reliable structure also helps students to prepare and feel comfortable for future conversations.

### Key Points

- Each school has a unique student body with different needs to be addressed in the safe space
- A strong foundation will strengthen meetings over time
- Ensure the student body has a place to feel safe and welcome

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## HOW

Although safe spaces vary from school to school, established safe spaces have found success in common ways. The most common approaches collected from established safe spaces in Michigan are shown in the table below.

**Table 1: Common Successful Safe Space Approaches**

High School Example	Contact with Administration	Meeting Location	Meeting Time	Agenda
Teacher in School A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approval to participate in club fair</li> <li>• Principal approves lessons the group presents to the school</li> </ul>	Teacher's classroom	Every 2 weeks, during homeroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using research and personal experience to create lessons for the school on diversity and inclusion</li> <li>• Celebrate cultural heritage months</li> <li>• Provide opportunities to speak at school board meetings</li> </ul>
Teacher in School B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administrator participated in the planning team</li> </ul>	Teacher's classroom	Every day, during homeroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build teacher-student relationships to make everybody feel safe</li> <li>• Practice activities on inclusivity</li> </ul>

## Guiding Questions

It is important to decide what meetings will look like.

- Who are the participants?
- Who will be the adult sponsor to support the students and communicate with administration?
- What will implementing safe spaces look like?
- What will happen at these meetings?
- More than “make a safe space”—when and where will you meet?
- How will the meetings be organized?

# Chapter 6

## Establish Roles

### WHAT

Roles must be established for an effective safe space. Delegating responsibilities for everyone keeps the safe space effective and efficient by organizing the process. Meetings require facilitation, agendas, goals, topics, and a purpose—and it can be difficult to separate these tasks. We recommend that students as well as adult leaders have roles in the safe space. The more the students participate and lead, the better. We also recommend that multiple people or groups hold these responsibilities instead of just one or two people.

### Facilitation

Facilitation refers to the in-meeting maintenance of discussion, which is important for safe space conversations. It can be used to guide and direct discussion while keeping the group focused and on-task. Some of the logistics include following a pre-made agenda and preparing the necessary materials and procedures beforehand.



### Agenda

Setting an agenda prior to the meeting is helpful to organize its structure. It can be used to set a schedule for the allotted meeting time and should be based on the topic of the meeting. When creating an agenda, be sure to set up a specific procedure or activity to optimize the meeting.

### Goal/Purpose

Setting a specific goal (or goals) and thinking about the purpose of each meeting helps to convey the overall idea. This helps attendees walk out with a new perspective or plan of action.

# SAFE SPACES RESOURCE

## Examples of Responsibilities

### Adult and Student Leaders

- Plan meetings and lead projects/discussions
- Create meeting agenda (meeting space, schedule)
  - Communicate with each other
  - Provide additional resources for students
- Begin the meeting and address students participating in the conversation
- Facilitate difficult conversations (especially in the beginning)
  - Be involved in conversation—offer adult perspective
  - Support conflict resolution



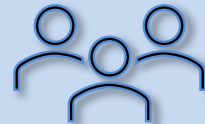
### Building Relationships



- Build strong relationships among students (See Chapter 2)
- Adult leaders should be honest with the group in regard to challenges they may need to face
- Inspire others by sharing their experiences, if they're comfortable, and actively listening
- Recruit more students/sustain group

### Small Groups

- Break into small groups during every discussion or activity
  - Share individual opinions before large group discussion
- Give all members a chance to contribute
- Split into committees to tackle different aspects of a problem or project
  - Within the safe space there could be groups for outreach, communicating with administration



### Community Members



- Invite organizations that align with the safe space's goals to share/present to the group
  - Collaborate with and/or learn from them
- Partner with community members for fundraising or support
- Seek opportunities to expand the safe space's outreach beyond the school
  - Community projects may include volunteering at local organizations, attending school/town board meetings

## Topic

Having a topic is very important when determining the area of discussion for the meeting. Having a topic helps discussions because it provides grounds for meaningful exchanges. On the other hand, it helps activist groups by outlining a problem and a solution.

All of these aspects are interconnected so it is important for leaders to communicate and prepare before the meeting. Some examples of responsibilities could include those in the Safe Spaces Resource graphic on the previous page.

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## WHY

Each safe space will have specific and relevant goals so the organization and leadership positions should suit the group's mission. In order to have productive conversations and meetings, it is necessary to establish roles for the safe space's members—adults, students, and others. Schools with safe spaces already in place agree that an adult leader should facilitate the group, but student members should be involved in the club's leadership. Safe spaces are meant to support students, and through student leadership, they can choose relevant topics that will create the most engaging discussion. A Michigan high school student said, "It helps our club move forward and get things done when we have a facilitator like a teacher, because it provides a necessary authoritative but trustworthy presence in the room." Creating a small group of student leadership also takes some responsibility off the adult leader, so the group can function more efficiently with a shared workload.



"It helps our club move forward and get things done when we have a facilitator like a teacher, because it provides a necessary authoritative but trustworthy presence in the room."

— Michigan High School Student

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## HOW

Similar to the process described in Chapter 1 (Establish the Purpose and Determine Who Participates), the organization of safe spaces should be catered to each school. This is essential because not every safe space is exactly the same. However, the students in the Student Advisory Council report that these leadership roles have proven successful in safe spaces in which they have participated. Also, the most important aspect of this process is student involvement. The goal is to create a safe space for students, by students. At the start of the group's creation, the adult leader should work with students to determine what styles of leadership will make the group most successful.

There are several ways students and adult leaders can determine roles and responsibilities:

- Brainstorming ways students can be leaders in the safe space
- Discussing what types of leaders are necessary for the group, including adult and student roles
  - Outreach, meeting planning, meeting facilitation, communication with adult leaders and administration, and so forth
- Holding elections or seeking volunteers for student leadership

## Guiding Questions

- What are students responsible for?
- Who takes the lead and responsibility? Students, adults, or both?
- Who would the adult be to support the group/get it started?
- What are some traits of passionate, involved students who appreciate meaningful conversations?
- How will identified students be encouraged to participate in the safe space?
- Who will brainstorm topics for safe space discussions? For outreach beyond the safe space?



# Chapter 7

## Celebrate Success

### How Do You Know When Safe Spaces are Making a Difference?

#### WHAT

Bringing conversations about diversity and inclusion into the educational setting is no small task, and it may feel challenging or slow. However, there are some common successes that you can identify and celebrate with your group along the way. The environment of the safe space needs to be comfortable, encouraging, and welcoming to strengthen morale. Success does not have to be monumental; little wins count as progress. Some examples of success may include completing a discussion, connecting with other members, or inviting peers to join the safe space.

#### WHY

Celebrating the little successes your group makes is critical for the students and the adults to keep a positive mindset and realize how valuable their efforts are. Every safe space will be different, and progress will look different group to group.

As one student safe space member said, “I live in a community with low diversity, and it can be easy to fixate on the aspects, opinions, and people I wish were different, and discouraging responses to my safe space’s advocacy. However, my group’s adult leader does a great job of preventing the negative criticism from distracting us from our passions. For example, when we surveyed the school after presenting lessons on racism and inclusivity awareness, we discussed the supportive comments, constructive criticism, and questions the students and staff members had with the student group. By focusing on the ways the safe

“By focusing on the ways the safe space was making a **positive** impact on our school, we felt pride in our accomplishments and inspiration to continue to reach our goals.”

— Michigan High School Student





space was making a *positive* impact on our school, we felt pride in our accomplishments and inspiration to continue to reach our goals.”

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### **HOW**

Set yourself up for success by setting achievable goals with everybody in the safe space—weekly, monthly, or yearly milestones—so that progress can be recognized when it is reached. Groups can determine what specific kinds of success they are working toward and can see or experience an authentic outcome from their efforts.

These missions could be solely within the safe space or could be projects that the group works on to share with the whole school or community.

### **Examples of Goals**

- New members are invited to expand the group
- Students plan and lead the safe space meetings
- School administration or community members listening and acting upon the group’s ideas or goals
- Students being proactive and identifying an issue, then addressing it with support (but not explicit direction) from adult leaders



Adult leaders can encourage success in safe spaces by focusing on the positive attention the group receives while being transparent about constructive criticism. It is important to remember that students *know* there will be pushback to their group, especially if the goal is to educate the school or advocate with a larger group. Adult leaders should highlight the support the group has in their school and community to encourage reaching the goals of the safe space.

Some ways to encourage the group are:

- Sharing specific and supportive feedback from other educators, teachers, community members, students, and so on
- Discussing constructive criticism and offering feedback as well as determining areas that need improvement for the future
- Praising their progress toward a goal, and celebrating when the goal is accomplished
- Reaching out to other schools/safe spaces to celebrate and share their successes
- Celebrating the group members with the school (similar to recognizing athletes and musicians)

## Guiding Questions

- What are some short-term realistic goals your safe space wants to accomplish?
- What are some activities you can do to celebrate?
- How can you use the input of your safe space group to celebrate successes?
- How can you effectively balance celebrating successes and using constructive criticism?

## Conclusion

Now that you're equipped with a detailed understanding of safe spaces and their importance, the MDE Student Advisory Council urges you to go forward and use this document to create positive change in your community. Consulting this resource is the first step of many that can be taken to make schools more welcoming, supportive, and beneficial for all. This document provides the framework necessary to build a safe space tailored to your students' needs.

Remember that a safe space is meant to support those struggling and to provide a reliable environment where people know they can receive help. The separate what, why, and how sections of each chapter in this resource will help make the creation of safe spaces more achievable. Again, each area or topic can be adjusted as needed to fit different individual schools or districts.

Finally, it is imperative that safe spaces are created *with* students. Encouraging students to participate in the safe space's development will not only provide a community sooner, but it will also help build a community that is best suited for them. The most effective safe spaces result from an evolving process. This means that participant feedback should be obtained along the way. Don't wait to start until you have it all perfect. Rely on this document and your students to begin and collaboratively shape a safe space.

Establishing a safe space may seem like a difficult task. However, using this resource as a guide can help you create a more positive educational environment with your students. Implemented over time and across the state, students throughout Michigan will be given the opportunity to be heard and supported. When establishing safe spaces becomes the norm, having a trustworthy community will not only help students mentally and emotionally, but it will also foster the atmosphere necessary for success, advancement, and overall well-being.

**Change starts with you.**

## Postscript

In the spring of 2020, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, a black man, by a white Minneapolis police officer, and amidst the national and international protests that ensued, I reached out to local superintendents across the state for nominations of students to serve on our statewide Student Advisory Council.

Initially convened to discuss students' views of race and racism at this challenging moment in our history, the Student Advisory Council—its membership changing through additional nominations by local school district leaders each year—would subsequently broaden its focus to the discussion of a range of topics in which student members expressed interest—but about which they often felt reluctant or fearful to discuss.

As students and MDE staff began to reflect upon how difficult it was to discuss race and racism, among other topics of concern to students, we began to reflect upon what sort of advice or guidance students might give their peers and educators across the state about how to establish safe or brave spaces in which to discuss these challenging topics.

From these early conversations, the seed of this report was born. This document is the product of countless discussions, both within the council and in local school districts, since 2020.

Written by some students but incorporating the thinking of many more who contributed to its ideas, it is intended to be a reference and guide to creating or extending upon safe spaces in local school districts in the state. It is as relevant and necessary today as it was in the spring of 2020.

I encourage all local school district leaders to consider the resources in this document, listen to their students, and work together to make safer environments in their schools and, in so doing, to create safer, better communities in which we all live. I'm proud of the students who discussed and wrote out these ideas over the last few years. It took courage to do so ... and will take courage for other students and staff to learn from and incorporate these ideas into their schools.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael F. Rice". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Michael" being more prominent and the last name "Rice" following in a similar style.

Michael F. Rice, Ph.D.  
State Superintendent

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