Columbine

Two lines: one for the boys, and one for the girls. Bags must be placed on the table-all items will be checked. School ID badges must be worn at all times. This is how a growing number of middle and high school students greet their school day. They are all but frisked, and still, school violence is a fear for most principals. While its easy to throw the blame on our young adults, I prefer to balance things a bit. Yes, when we look at Columbine, we realize that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had a choice in their behavior; you don't have to hurt others to get your own feelings out.

And what about those students who hurt no one but themselves? When Pearl Jam chose to release the video for their song Jeremy in 1992, both the song and the images of a skinny kid spiraling into mental anguish and despair tore us apart. Pearl Jam won awards (rightfully so, the link to the video is http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNO6pAJBCs4), and 7 years later two young men changed how Americans viewed public school safety by killing 12 students and teachers, before committing suicide.

A few months ago in my AP English class, we analyzed the video for Jeremy. My goal was to discuss with students the possible causes of student violence, either directed at themselves, or teachers and students. Most students said what we've trained them to say: Jeremy was bullied. No one liked him.

Now, when you ask a teacher why a student would commit such acts of violence, they revert to the same answer, with a slight addition: he had a bad homelife, obviously. Kids taunted him. He wasn't socially adjusted.

I'd like to offer an approach that encompasses the school's culpability as well.   As a school, the culture should be one of inclusion. So, are American schools inclusive? Consider that in the news yesterday there was a gay student who went online at school looking for GLBT scholarships, only to find out that over 100 schools in Tennessee are illegally censoring websites that are not sexually explicit in content. At the same time, anti-gay websites (that openly promote 'de-gaying') were not blocked. His lawyer is considering a lawsuit.

Schools have an obligation to make sure that all students feel respected, and protected. The fact is however, many teachers (unfortunately) allow their personal viewpoints on race, sexual orientation, and religion to skew their duty to teach in an ethical way. In addition, we must create a culture of respect in the schools. For example, students consistently use the word 'gay' to describe things they abhor. That word is strictly forbidden in my classroom. If you don't like something, you don't have the right to condemn a minority group in the country.

To ANY teacher, "gay" should be synonymous with "nigger." Not because all students to be pro-gay: students have a constitutional right to disagree with that. The reason is

because during middle and high school, confusion about sexuality and race are common. If a student feels that no one (not even a teacher) will stand up for the rights of those in the minority, and they have to be at school for 8 hours a day, 5 days a week, who can they turn to?

And it's not just gay students who feel excluded: atheist students, rural students, urban-turned-suburban students. Our schools are not creating a culture of mutual respect.

Each week, I'm going to give tips and advice for helping schools become more inclusive, because given the enormous amount of stress teenagers are under, no student walk through a school door with hundreds of people, yet feel like there's no one there but them.