




PROJECT SPEAK UP!

DIRECTOR'S GUIDE

MAKING THE CASE TO SPEAK UP!

Project SPEAK UP! is a way for Theatre Educators to use the transformative power of theatre as a catalyst for difficult conversations within their school community about many of the underlying causes of teen suicide.

As we presented SPEAK UP! at three Thespian festivals for educational theatre audiences we heard numerous stories from teachers, parents and students about their personal experiences with one or more issues in the play.

One of the most shocking responses came from a young man who stated that at his school, there had been *four* suicides over the course of his time in high school and *the school administration had done nothing* to address the issues. This one comment has motivated the creative team of Project SPEAK UP! to encourage the educational theatre community to use SPEAK UP! as a tool to awaken their school administrators to the importance of creating mental health protocols and interventions and to serve as a catalyst for conversation.

According to the CDC and American Association of Suicidology, *“Talking to teens about suicide does not increase the risk of suicide – in fact decreases it.”*

In the State of California, Assembly Bill 2639 mandates schools serving grades 7 to 12 to adopt a policy on pupil suicide prevention.

Section 215 (a) (1) The governing board or body of a local educational agency that serves pupils in grades 7 to 12, inclusive, shall, before the beginning of the 2017-18 school year, adopt, at a regularly scheduled meeting, a policy on pupil suicide prevention in grades 7 to 12, inclusive. The policy shall be developed in consultation with school and community stakeholders, school-employed mental health professionals, and suicide prevention experts and shall, at minimum, address procedures relating to suicide prevention, intervention and postvention.

Section 215 (2)

The policy shall specifically address the needs of high-risk groups, including, but not limited to, all of the following:

- A. Youth bereaved by suicide.*
- B. Youth with disabilities, mental illness, or substance abuse disorders.*
- C. Youth experiencing homelessness or in out-of-home settings, such as foster care.*
- D. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning youth.*

The legislation goes on to recommend teacher and staff training.

Most states require some form of training, however not all! The degree of effectiveness of suicide prevention programs ranges based on the school's leadership, resources, partnerships, and readiness.

STEP BY STEP GUIDE FOR DIRECTORS:

1. Become an advocate. Know the facts. Preparation is key. Research local organizations who might serve as a partner in this educational theatre venture.
2. Talk to your administration and counseling department and suggest that the theatre department organize Project SPEAK UP! at your school.
3. In consultation with your administration and counseling department, assess your school's readiness. **(For more information on surveys and statistics, refer to the tool kit found on the Theatre on Purpose website)**
4. Begin by presenting the play to adult faculty and staff.
5. Conduct follow up talk backs and surveys to capture the important data on how the adults in your school community feel about their capabilities to support students in crisis.
6. Develop a plan for the roll out of Project SPEAK UP! to parents and other adults.
7. Based on the data gathered from the surveys and talk backs, the school can begin to coordinate a mental health task force who can create protocols and a process appropriate for your school community.
8. Create a peer counselor training program for students.
9. Seek support from your local chapter of NAMI and the National Association for Suicide Prevention.
10. When presenting the play to student audiences have an opt out for students and parents. **(Sample form available on the T.O.P. Website)**

HOW TO PREPARE, TRAIN AND CARE FOR YOUR CAST:

SPEAK UP! is a play but we recommend that you not refer to it as a performance. SPEAK UP! is a teaching tool and therefore when SPEAK UP! is presented it should be put into that context. SPEAK UP! is not entertainment.

For this reason, we require any school or organization to sign a **memorandum of agreement** about the play's use and strongly urge directors to follow the baseline responsibilities when presenting SPEAK UP! to students and adults. **(Downloadable MOA is on the T.O.P. Website.)**

Prior to auditioning students for SPEAK UP! we recommend having parents sign a permission form. **(Available on the T.O.P. Website.)**

1. Parent release form for cast.
2. Trigger warning for students who audition: Students who choose to be involved in Project SPEAK UP! may not be fully cognizant of their own psychological vulnerabilities. We recommend that a discussion about the project take place prior to reading through the play.
3. When casting SPEAK UP! it is important to consider your school's demographics. The scenarios presented in SPEAK UP! take on a different resonance depending on the actors physical look and age.
4. The play is emotionally charged and dramatic. Each character has their important function in the play. Each character is on a journey; it is important to allow for levels of intensity to build.
5. The play is designed very simply requiring only 4 chairs to allow it to be produced in any space or venue. The character of Reese is writing a suicide note (prop) and the character of Gwen presents her mother with some literature/brochures (prop). No other props or sets are needed.
6. The character of Gordon is the only character in the play who takes his own life. This is dramatized simply by having him stand on his chair and turn upstage. There should be no physical action indicating a noose as this is too explicit.
7. Running time should not exceed 27 minutes.
8. Immediately following the presentation, a facilitator (who may be the director) should give the audience a moment to exhale and process before beginning the talk back.
9. Kleenex should be discreetly made available in the rows of chairs.

10. We recommend that the cast have an opportunity to do a talk back with trained mental health professionals in order to process their own response to the material. If the play is presented multiple times, we recommend that you conduct periodic mental health checks with the cast to assess their well-being.
11. During the talk backs, after a presentation of SPEAK UP!, audiences will invariably want to hear from the cast. We recommend giving them an opt out if they are uncomfortable with this role. We also recommend that you provide students with guidelines for talk backs. Care should be taken to remind the cast that they are not trained therapists. Should they find themselves in a situation requiring a response to a peer's reaction to the play, cast members should be equipped with the school's referral protocols, including but not limited to: the suicide prevention hot line, text numbers, and the names of adult counselors, teachers, clergy or administrators for immediate referral for students in crisis.
12. The cast does not need to be a part of the talk back. This should be at the discretion of the director and the counseling staff. We recommend a panel format with school counselors or mental health professionals from within the community. (**Sample talk back questions are available on the T.O.P. website.**)