

September 13th, 2024

Dear South St. Paul Families,

South St. Paul Public Schools (SSPPS) is excited to share the addition of the AmazeWorks book program. AmazeWorks is a St. Paul, Minnesota based non-profit organization that works with schools to provide professional development and book resources that are culturally and linguistically responsive. This anti-biased book program aligns to our core values of teaching respect, equity and resilience to all our learners and promotes respect for social and emotional skills that foster healthy identity development and respect across differences. Teachers also engage in ongoing self-reflection about how their own identities and biases impact relationships and their work with children and families.

Each picture book in the AmazeWorks program explores different cultures, identities, lived experiences, and family structures. AMAZE programs in SSPPS foster the knowledge, values and skills that adults and the next generation need in order to support and respect each other across differences of race, class, culture, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion/faith, and physical ability.

Each lesson contains teacher-led discussion questions, journal prompts, and follow-up activities.

By facilitating meaningful discussions about identity, difference, and bias, teachers prevent biased-based teasing and mistreatment while maintaining a safe and supportive school environment. Students learn and feel better in classrooms where they feel seen and valued for all of who they are. Students learn about empathy, accepting oneself, respect for others, noticing and rejecting bias, and standing up for themselves and others. These topics are also infused with CASEL Social Emotional Framework: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

SSPPS acknowledges that parents/guardians are the primary educator for their child/children and we are committed to partnering with you to provide supplementary resources to support you in this role.

Please reach out to your school administrator if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Theresa Marty
Lincoln Center Principal

Terry Bretoi
Kaposia Education Center Principal

The AmazeWorks Book Program is designed to create an environment where *all* students feel seen, valued, and respected. The AmazeWorks Book Program focuses on five main topics:

Empathy and Understanding

- The goal is not to push any particular viewpoint, but rather to help students think critically about different perspectives and engage in meaningful conversations. This prepares them for the diverse world they will encounter beyond the classroom.
- Identify adults in school community who can turn to for support
- Positive social connections between students and their families across all differences
- Did You Know
 - Developing empathy helps children recognize the feelings of others and encourages them to build relationships with those who are different from themselves (Belzung, 2014).
 - Students with larger emotional vocabularies and greater ability to identify the emotions of others are less likely to be rejected by their peers or be victimized by peers (Miller et al., 2005).

Healthy, Complex Identities

- Recognizing social and personal identities in yourself and others
- Learning about assumptions and questioning them to learn more
- Building awareness of healthy, complex identities in the classroom and recognizing identities that are visible and invisible
- Connecting each story and lesson to identities and lived experiences
 - Did You Know
 - Identity is highly impacted by the bias and stereotypes groups and individuals face (Bowleg, 2012; Ecklund 2012). A strong sense of identity (both self/personal identity and group/social identity) contributes to resilience in the face of these bias and stereotypes (Chen et al., 2012).

Respect Across Differences

- Finding enjoyment and connection across human differences
- Reflecting on noticing people as “others” and exploring how that makes you feel about yourself
- Building awareness of assumptions, fears, and misconceptions when recognizing human diversity
- Examining your own reactions and responsiveness to difference
- Develop accurate information about other people’s lived identities and experience to build awareness, empathy, and understanding
- Promote student’s comfortable, empathetic interaction with people from diverse backgrounds
- Creating connection between your students and their families through a windows and mirrors perspective

Did You Know

Social identities are sometimes swept into overgeneralizations. Children must learn that sharing a social identity, such as race or ability, does not necessarily mean sharing the same perspectives or world view. Without this understanding, children are vulnerable to making assumptions based on what knowledge they have (or think they have) of each social identity group, including groups to which they belong.

Notice, Name, and Reject Bias

- Building awareness around the impact of bias, prejudice, and stereotypes in your own life
- Identifying how you have been advantaged or disadvantaged by the “isms” (racism, sexism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, etc) and the stereotypes and prejudices you have experienced about yourself and others
- Using topics to name and unpack misconceptions and stereotypes as their arise
- Fostering each student’s capacity to critically identify bias
- Nurturing each student’s empathy fo the hurt bias causes

Did You Know

Lessons specifically designed to help children notice and identify bias increased students’ ability to respond to biased statements and actions and made them more likely to see the benefits of interacting with their peers across differences (Pahlke et al., 2014).

Responsiveness and Action

- Exploring the mindset, behaviors, skills, and tools that foster responsiveness for self and others in the face of bias and discrimination
- Engaging in topics to support and strengthen students’ innate sense of justice and their capacity to respond to and change unfair situations
- Cultivating each student’s ability and confidence to stand up for themselves and others in the face of bias

Did You Know

In a study examining which factors influence a student’s decisions to intervene against harassment, seeing another student intervene had more impact than seeing a teacher intervene (Wernick et al., 2014). Peer behavior is especially important for boys. When boys were part of peer groups where there was frequent bullying, they were significantly less likely to stand up for children who were targeted by bullying behaviors (Espelage et al., 2011).