

Preparing Your Class to Meet with a Holocaust Survivor

It cannot be stressed enough how important it is for students to have the opportunity to meet with a Holocaust survivor. The reality that the opportunity to meet with these survivors lessens as the years go on is an obvious one. The problem that you as the classroom teacher have is how to maximize this experience for your students. Just having the survivor appear and “talk to the class” about their experiences is not enough. Students need to be prepared for this experience, and they need to have an accountability exercise related to the survivor’s talk. Below I have made a number of suggestions for making the experience meaningful for the students, as well as the survivor.

Preparing the Students for the Experience

Students need to be prepared for such an informational and often times emotional experience. In order to do this, I suggest the following:

1. If possible, announce that the class will be having a survivor at least one week in advance.
2. Make sure that the students know the name of the survivor and where he or she is from.
3. If the survivor was involved in a particular event during the Holocaust such as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, make sure that the class has covered that event.
4. Make the students aware that the survivor may often speak with an accent. Students need to have their listening skills worked on so that they will not be distracted by the survivor’s accent.
5. Prepare the students for the possibility that the survivor may become emotional.
6. Prepare the students for asking questions of the survivor. Again this involves listening skills on the part of the students so that they will not ask questions that have already been answered.
7. Students may feel shy about asking questions, having a special “speaker sheet” that students will fill out with questions and turn in to the speaker might help with this situation.

Your Preparation As the Teacher

It is not easy having any speaker come into your class, let alone a Holocaust survivor. If you do not know the survivor personally, I suggest the following:

1. If possible, personally call the survivor to welcome them to your class.
2. Make sure that you have the spelling and pronunciation of their name correct.
3. Explain to the survivor the type of class that they will be speaking to. Information regarding the age of the students, subject that the students are taking with you, and how much information the students have been taught about the Holocaust are all important bits of information.
4. Give the survivor an idea of how long they will have to speak.
5. Make sure the survivor knows how to get to your school, where he or she should park or be dropped off, and whether or not signing in at the front office is necessary.
6. Make arrangements for either the teacher or a student to meet the survivor and escort him or her to the classroom.

Little Items to Remember When the Survivor is Speaking

Before the survivor arrives in the room, you should do the following:

1. Have a glass or cup of water ready for the speaker.
2. Have several choices as to where the speaker could sit or stand while they are doing their presentation.
3. Have all informational sheets passed out to the students.
4. Make sure the students are aware of your behavioral expectations.
5. Microphones often come in handy, especially if either the group or the room is large.

While the speaker is talking:

1. Monitor classroom behavior: it is imperative that the teacher remain with the students.
2. This should go without saying, but the teacher should refrain from doing other things such as grading papers.
3. Be prepared to repeat questions for the survivor. You may need to re-phrase some of the questions.
4. Monitor the time so that there will be enough time for questions. If it is a period when PA announcements might be made, make sure that the speaker is aware of this.

After the Survivor has Spoken

At the conclusion of the survivor's talk, you should do the following.

1. Personally thank the speaker in front of the class.
2. Allow students, if they wish, to speak individually with the survivor. In some cases, students may even find that the survivor may want to take pictures with the students or even to hug some of them.
3. Make sure that the survivor is escorted back to the car or to the place where he or she will be picked up. If the survivor needs to sign out in the main office, this is something that a student could assist with.
4. As a part of the over-all experience, have the students write thank you notes to the survivor. Stress to the students the spelling of the survivor's name. Also the notes should be written in ink or done on a computer. Stress the importance of spelling, etc.
5. After the survivor has left the room, be prepared to answer some questions that the students may have. If there is not enough time, open your class the next day with a closure on the experience.
6. Make sure to collect and check the thank you notes. Also make sure to deliver or mail these notes as soon as possible. A phone call from you to the survivor would also be appropriate.

The opportunity to have a survivor speak to a class is a most important one. Make the most of it!

We hope these guidelines will be helpful to you as the classroom teacher.