



**Increasing Awareness and Empathy around Disabilities
at the High School Level
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Introduction

Changing Perspectives (www.ChangingPerspectivesNow.org) is a national nonprofit organization based in Vermont that provides disability awareness programs in schools through a combination of curriculum materials and educator training opportunities. Its mission is to engage students in open dialogue and real-world experiences to promote disability awareness and foster inclusive communities. Schools across the country are dealing with issues of bullying and social isolation while at the same time being asked to meet the academic and emotional needs of an increasingly diverse student body. Awareness is the foundation of empathy. For students to achieve a greater sense of empathy, they must first develop an awareness and appreciation of differences.

Changing Perspectives is not another prescriptive or burdensome initiative. The program is designed for customization so schools can incorporate this learning into their existing programming seamlessly. Using an online platform, educators can easily access a variety of resources (e.g., lesson plans, book lists, video clips, e-planners) and select the materials that will be most relevant and meaningful for their students. The focus of the Changing Perspectives programs is to engage students in hands-on learning to build greater awareness of differences and inspire empathy.

This report presents findings from the 2017-18 classroom pilot field test of the new Changing Perspectives High School Disability Awareness & Call To Action curriculum. The program was piloted in five Vermont high schools.

Description of High School Program's Curriculum and Coaching

The High School Disability Awareness curriculum is designed to inspire an evolution from awareness to understanding to action. The program is divided into two main sections: Awareness and Call To Action.

Awareness: Awareness resources are organized into learning modules that feature 30-minute lessons, book lists with discussion questions, role playing activities, and video discussion questions, and SPARK!5 activities.

The 12 learning modules help students learn about specific disabilities as well as the intersections between disability and society. Modules include:

- What is Empathy?
- Language & History Around Disability

- Assistive Technology
- Autism
- Learning Disabilities
- Hearing & Vision Impairments
- Social-Emotional Challenges
- Mental Health
- Physical Disability
- Cognitive
- Disability in the Media
- Famous People with Disabilities

In addition to the 12 learning modules, partner educators have access to a suite of Spark!5 activities. These short activities are designed to ignite interest and dialogue in 15 minutes or less, making them ideal for TA/homeroom periods.

Call to Action: The Call To Action section of the curriculum challenges students to engage in a project or activity that brings about social change and encourages inclusion in their schools and/or communities. Projects provide opportunities for students to become leaders in their schools. Changing Perspectives offers ideas, resources, and tips to help educators facilitate these projects with their secondary school students.

Coaching: Recognizing that the issues brought up as part of this curriculum can be sensitive, Changing Perspectives offers technical assistance to all partner schools as well as options for customized coaching. Whether individual or group, coaching aims to assist classroom educators, guidance counselors, and other school faculty in navigating and implementing the program to maximize student outcomes.

High School Program Pilot Sites

Changing Perspectives partnered with five schools in Vermont to pilot the high school curriculum:

- Woodstock Union High School – Woodstock, VT
- Craftsbury Academy – Craftsbury, VT
- Oxbow Union High School – Bradford, VT
- Riverbend Technical Center – Bradford, VT
- Sharon Academy – Sharon, VT

Of the five participating schools, two provided student and educator data used for this report.

Since the curriculum takes a customized approach, the ways in which the participating high schools implemented the program varied, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Implementation Models for Using the Changing Perspectives High School Program

School	Implementation Model
Woodstock UHS	Whole School, over a 5-week period during weekly advisory periods
Craftsbury Academy	Whole school, over a 6-week period
Oxbow UHS	Once weekly by a single educator during 11 th grade social studies class
Riverbend Technical Center	Once weekly with student council
Sharon Academy	Once a week for 3 weeks in one class

Evaluation

For this pilot year, Changing Perspectives elected to conduct a formal evaluation of the program so as to inform the program’s design, development, and outcomes for student and educator learning. Dr. Cynthia Char of Char Associates, an independent evaluation firm based in Montpelier, Vermont, served as the external evaluation advisor, and collaborated on the study with Sam Drazin, the executive director of Changing Perspectives.

The evaluation’s primary objectives were two-fold: (1) to gather formative feedback about the program to inform and improve the curriculum design and use, and (2) to evaluate the program’s educational benefits and impacts upon student learning and educators’ classroom practice.

Given the program’s highly customizable approach to design and classroom implementation, each educator’s instructional choices and style shapes and influences student experiences and students’ subsequent feedback about the program.

Methodology and Sample: A variety of data collection methods were used to gather formative feedback and impact data for the high school curriculum from schools. Methods include post-program surveys for both students and educators. Both surveys were administered online through the Qualtrics platform.

Two of the five schools participating in the field test submitted completed student and educator post-program surveys. Educator data was collected from five educators, while student data was collected from about 200 students.

Educator Findings

Perceived Need in High Schools: Educators were asked why they were interested in using Changing Perspectives with their students. Respondents described the ways they feel the curriculum could

potentially improve school culture and school climate, as well as provide students with important life skills.

- *I am an advisory coordinator at my school and one of our goals is to make our school a more inclusive place. I hold a deep belief that you have to work strategically on school culture and that you have to take active steps to help students think about the perspectives of others. This program is a way to foster dialogue and help students to think about the perspectives of others.*
- *We thought we could use your curriculum to help students consider and have conversations about many kinds of differences in others, and wanted to improve school culture and attitudes by talking about differences and disabilities.*
- *We wanted to work to increase awareness of visible and invisible disabilities within our student body.*
- *I was interested in allowing my students the chance to grapple with topics that are not usually explicitly discussed in school, but are so practical for living life every single day!*
- *I am interested in implementing this program because no matter where we are and what we are exposed to, our students need to be entering this world aware of the fact that there are so many differences in each of our lives. We need to embrace those differences and show our acceptance for all.*

Educational Value: Educators were asked to assess the program’s educational value across four key dimensions: (1) informational value, (2) social-emotional value, (3) usability, and (4) appeal to students. Rating the curriculum’s value using a 4-point scale (Poor, Fair, Good, Very Good), educators gave the program positive marks in all areas.

All five educators (100%) rated Changing Perspectives as strong in its **informational value** (Good [2], Very Good [3]), its **social-emotional value** (Good [1], Very Good [4]), and its **usability**, in terms of how easy the program was to implement in their classrooms. (Good [2], Very good [3]).

Educator views were slightly more tempered regarding the program’s **appeal for students**. Four out of five educators (80%) rated its appeal as Good (3) or Very good (1), while one rated it as Fair (1).

Similarly, using a more differentiated 5-point rating scale for students’ enthusiasm (Not At All, Slightly, Moderately, Very, and Extremely), educators reported that students were either Moderately (3) or Very (2) enthusiastic about the program.

Promoting Positive Classroom Outcomes: The Changing Perspectives high school curriculum consists of two major components – Awareness and Call To Action – each of which is designed to address particular educational objectives. Educators were asked to use a 5-point scale to assess the curriculum’s program components and the success with which they felt each element achieved its particular student learning goals (Not At All, Slightly, Moderately, Very, Extremely).

Educators were uniformly positive about the awareness components of the curriculum. As shown in Table 2, 100% of responding educators rated the curriculum as successful in providing students with a variety of activities that expose them to new concepts around disabilities and differences and in sparking open and meaningful discussions around differences.

Table 2. Educator Ratings of Program Components

Program Component	Educator Ratings of Program Components
Awareness: Provided students with a variety of activities that expose them to new concepts around disability and difference	100% of Educators (n=5) (Very [3], Extremely [2] successful)
Awareness: Sparked open and meaningful discussions around differences.	100% of Educators (n=5) (Very [4], Extremely [1] successful)
Call To Action: Provided students with an engaging hands on experience.	66% of Educators (n=3) (Slightly [1], Very [1], Extremely [1] successful)
Call To Action: Provided students with an opportunity to make a change in their school community.	100% Educators (n=4) (Slightly [1], Moderately [3] successful)

All five educators (100%) who completed the survey were enthusiastic about the positive impacts Changing Perspectives had on their students and classmates. When asked what they felt the main values of the program are, educators noted the positive impacts that having meaningful conversations had on cultivating greater empathy.

- *It allowed them time to reflect on the inclusivity of our school. It taught them about empathy and allowed them to have meaningful discussions. It helped us make time for these kinds of conversations.*
- *It created a platform for honest and open discussion about many disabilities many may not be aware of on a daily basis.*
- *I think that this curriculum allowed our students and staff to have real conversations that improved the social-emotional atmosphere at our school.*

Some educators acknowledged that they were not able to implement the Call To Action component as fully as they wished. Two out of three regarded the Call To Action as successful in providing students with an engaging hands-on experience, while none indicated that it had been highly successful in providing students with an opportunity to make a change in their school community.

- *It definitely led to a lot of conversations in small advisory groups about differences and disabilities, and I think it gave students a lot of information that they weren't aware of before. We have not followed through with a call to action, which I regret, but it could still be something we pursue in the future.*

Interest in Continued Use and Recommended Broader Use: Educators offered a solid endorsement of the program’s educational value for two additional indicators: Continued Use and Use by Others.

Educators were enthusiastic about the program’s continued use at their schools in the future and in its spread to other schools. All five educators (100%) stated that they would use Changing Perspectives again and that they would recommend the curriculum to another educator.

- *This program is one that will absolutely change the way you and your students interact, positively!*
- *It is amazing to have so many ideas and activities at your fingertips.*
- *This program has sparked amazing conversations with my high school students that they really, truly WANT to have but hadn’t had the platform for before.*

Increased Educator Capacity in Building Inclusive Classroom Communities: The program’s professional development goals are for educators to gain confidence and skills in three major areas: (1) discussing issues around differences/disabilities with students, (2) building a classroom community within the inclusive classroom model, and (3) encouraging positive interactions among all students. Educators rated how much they felt they had increased their confidence and skills in these three areas as a result of Changing Perspectives (5-point scale: Not At All, Slightly, Moderately, Very, and Extremely).

Four out of five educators (80%) reported clear increases in their confidence and skill concerning discussing issues around differences (disabilities) with their students and being better able to encourage positive interactions among all students. Three out of five educators (60%) reported feeling better equipped with relevant skills in building community within the inclusive classroom model, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Educator Ratings of Professional Development Outcomes

Professional Development Outcome	Educators Indicating Increases in Confidence and Skills (Very or Extremely)
More confident and comfortable discussing issues around differences (disabilities) with your students	80% of Educators (n=5) (Slightly [1], Very [3], Extremely [1])
Better equipped with relevant skills in building classroom community within the inclusive classroom model	60% of Educators (n=5) (Slightly [1], Moderately [1], Very [2], Extremely [1])
Better able to encourage positive interactions among <i>all</i> students	80% of Educators (n=5) (Moderately [1] Very [3], Extremely [1])

Several educators described how the opportunities for discussion and communication helped them build a more caring classroom community and shared specific stories about the impacts the program had in their classrooms.

- *My advisory group (juniors) took part in a video-making process to help promote [Changing Perspectives] and the students loved being able to share their interest in these topics. It united my group during a stressful academic time. It also opened up the eyes of several of them to the idea of studying social emotional learning for their senior capstone projects next year!*
- *My students were the most attentive I have ever seen them when sitting on a Friday afternoon listening to Sam Drazin share his own experiences and reasons for beginning Changing Perspectives. Several of our more defiant students stood up after that talk and walked up to Sam to shake his hand. I realized at that moment that these students NEED these activities and these conversations and truly embrace the platform with which to do so. I also was able to add in an activity of my own to the lesson that focused on visible and invisible differences, and my junior class had an amazing conversation about their own visible and invisible differences that sparked an awesome dialogue within the group; it was a true teambuilding activity.*
- *I have two freshmen with Type I diabetes. We had a powerful discussion about how they struggle to handle how people in their lives treat them in a new way after their diagnosis.*

Student Findings

Through an online post-program survey, about 200 students from Woodstock Union High School and Craftsbury Academy provided valuable student feedback about Changing Perspectives. It is important to note that none of the pilot schools fully implemented the Call To Action component of the program; this resulting in variations in sample size by question.

Greater Awareness and Understanding of Disabilities: Students were asked to reflect upon whether or not Changing Perspectives helped them learn about disabilities (4-point scale: Not At All, A Little, Some, A Lot).

Of the students responding, 60% reported that they had gained an increased awareness of people with disabilities and differences (Some [43%], A Lot [17%]) and had acquired greater comfort levels with discussing disabilities and differences (Some [33.6%] A lot [26%]).

Table 4. Students’ Awareness and Understanding of Disabilities

Metric	Not at all	A Little	Some	A Lot
Gain awareness of people with disabilities and differences (n=202)	15%	25%	43%	17%
Consider ways I could make my school more inclusive to all people (n=200)	18%	31%	36.5%	14.5%
Help me reflect on my own challenges (n=199)	25.5%	34%	23.5%	17%
Feel comfortable discussing disabilities and differences (n=199)	16%	24%	34%	26%

Students expressed what they had learned in the following ways:

- *I’ve widened my view about who is different...pretty much everyone is. This program reminded me that everyone has a “thing,” everyone has something they struggle with, and everyone has ways of dealing with their struggles. You don’t really know what people are going through, so just simply being kind is the best answer.*
- *We not only learned about physical disabilities, but invisible disabilities (anxiety, dyslexia, etc) which affect a much wider range of people, including their own peers. We gained a better understanding of each other.*
- *[I learned] that each person has their own stories, battles, and obstacles they needed to overcome in life.*
- *I now feel that I have a deeper understanding of disabilities and how they affect people, as well as how they are commonly portrayed by the media. I don’t think my viewpoint on them has changed because I already have a pretty open view on them, and try to be as understanding as possible. But I do feel that I have a deeper understanding as a whole.*

Building an inclusive school culture and personal awareness: Students were also queried about the ways they feel Changing Perspectives has helped their school and them, yielding the following results using a 4-point scale (A Lot, Some, A Little, Not At All):

- 51% of students indicated that they have experienced gains in considering ways they could make their school more inclusive to all people (A lot [14.5%], Some [36.5%]).
- 41% of students reported that the curriculum has helped them reflect on their own challenges (Some [24%], A lot [17%]).

Students elaborated on these experiences:

- *Changing perspectives has given the school and I more ideas of how to become more empathetic and open to diversity.*

- *I think that everything I learned was equally important, but if I had to take one the most to heart it would be to accept those around you. Try to understand how their mind might work differently than yours does, and how that affects them.*
- *The most important thing we talked about is having empathy. While I knew this was important before, it's good to have a reminder to be empathetic. Sometimes it can be forgotten when I am dealing with my own struggles.*

Strong Student Endorsement of the Importance of Learning About Disabilities: When asked whether students in other schools should learn about kids with disabilities, 81% of responding students indicated that they think the curriculum would benefit all students.

- *I think that it is important that EVERYONE learn about disabilities, in all their varying forms, because disabilities of all kinds affect so many people!*
- *Learning about disabilities can really show people how different those around them can be. Some people might not be able to change their mindset on disabilities easily, and they still might be judgmental to others, but as a whole, this program can really help expand the knowledge of those partaking in it.*
- *Often people are prejudiced because they don't understand the challenges other people face. When schools help students learn more about other people's experiences, it can cause them to be more empathetic and accepting.*

Concluding Remarks

The High School Disability Awareness & Call To Action pilot indicates that educators and students at the secondary level believe the curriculum is a valuable resource for schools. Although the data sample size was small for the pilot, particularly for educators, the overall response toward the program regarding its value, ease of use, learning outcomes, applicability, and benefits is positive.

Beyond the validation of a positive response, we value the feedback that highlights areas in which Changing Perspectives can strengthen the program's content and delivery.

References

Char, C. and Drazin, S. (2016] *Anyone Can Do Anything: Pilot Evaluation of the Changing Perspectives Disability Awareness Curriculum*. Report from Char Associates and Changing Perspectives, Bradford, VT.

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