

The Empty Seat

From the practice of Elliott McCray, Ed.S., The McCray Learning Lab

What this builds (transformative SEL): Collaborative problem-solving (“We solve it together”) with a thread of Belonging (“I belong”).

Use this as a short SEL, advisory, counseling, or mentoring activity on being an upstander. Students may pass, write privately, draw, or answer out loud. Noor’s lunchroom moment gives every move a story to hang on.

15-minute mini-lesson

1. Read the Hero panel so students know the lunchroom moment, then let Pip introduce the three Word Power words.
2. Open **Part 1: The Empty Seat**. Ask what a bystander is, and how Sam might feel.
3. Do **Use Your Words** as a group and talk through what changes when the words turn calm, kind, and brave.
4. Invite one private “upstander sentence” (Part 5: Say It Like an Upstander).
5. Close with one voluntary share-out.

Behavior, not identity

The teasing is named as an *action* (“some kids laughed,” “that wasn’t kind”), never as a “bad kid.” A child who has *been* that kid can still come along: the redirects coach, they never scold.

Trauma-sensitive facilitation

Don’t require personal sharing. Let students pass. Validate feelings before pushing action. Never frame freezing as a character flaw: it happens to almost everybody.

This is a practice tool for rehearsing skills, not therapy, counseling, or a clinical service.

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