



Mixing It Up

The simple act of eating with students they didn't know helped these kids and teens grow as people

It's lunchtime at your school cafeteria. Where do you sit? If you're like most kids, you eat with the same group every day. Your crowd of lunch friends probably formed as a result of a common bond, like with these students:

"I sit with kids from baseball and my old elementary school," Jeremy Russo, 12, a sixth-grader at Northley Middle School in Aston, Pennsylvania, tells *Choices*.

"I try to sit with different people, but I usually sit with my friends, who are almost all Mexican," says Itzel Rojas, a 16-year-old junior at Century High School in Hillsboro, Oregon.

Sharing a Meal

It's comfortable to eat lunch with the same people every day. But wouldn't it be nice to change things up once in a while—to sit somewhere totally random, with a brand-new group? That's what happens on Mix It Up at Lunch Day. Jeremy, Itzel, and students in thousands of schools across the country participated in a national program last year. At one school, students were given lollipops, then told to sit at tables that matched the candy's color. At another school, kids were sorted by the month in which they were born. The method doesn't matter—as long as it shakes up the usual social order of the cafeteria.

The idea behind Mix It Up at Lunch Day, which is sponsored by the Southern Poverty Law Center, is that getting to *Story continues on next page.*

mix it up at your school

This year, Mix It Up at Lunch Day is on November 9. Find out how your school can get involved, and download posters and activity sheets at www.mixitup.org.



Students mix together in Michigan.



Enjoying a meal and conversation



Making posters

know people who are different from you builds understanding and trust—and makes **prejudice** and exclusion less likely. Keith Payne, an associate professor of psychology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, studies prejudice. He says, “The more you interact with people who seem different from you, the more you’re likely to realize that they’re really not as different as they seem.”

And, as Lecia Brooks of the Southern Poverty Law Center points out, “The cafeteria is one of the most segregated places on any school campus.”

Some kids participate in Mix It Up at Lunch Day because it sounds fun. At Century High School, the most recent Mix It Up included **incentives**, like ice cream for everyone who participated and a performance by the school’s break-dance team. Other kids do it because their schools say they must.

WHAT TO TALK ABOUT?

Even if your school doesn’t participate in Mix It Up at Lunch Day, there will always be opportunities for you to meet new people. Here are questions you can ask to break the ice when meeting someone for the first time:

- What’s the most embarrassing thing that has ever happened to you?
- What’s your dream vacation?
- Who’s your favorite teacher?
- Who is your least favorite teacher?
- What’s your favorite food?
- If you could have dinner with a famous person, who would it be?
- If you had \$1 million to give to a charity, which would you choose? Why?

Century High School is ethnically mixed, and students are generally tolerant. “Luckily, at Century we all get along pretty well,” says Nicole Thompson, a senior who also helped organize the Mix It Up event. But occasional incidents do occur—such as when “terrorist” was scrawled on the bulletin board display that was meant to celebrate Middle Eastern cultures, according to Layla.

Does Mix It Up at Lunch Day cure **discrimination**? No, says Nicole, but it

Spreading Tolerance

Layla Aden, a 16-year-old sophomore at Century High, got involved “as a way to get the **tolerance** message across.” A Muslim who wears a headscarf, Layla experienced bias firsthand, like “kids whispering things in the hallway, but doing it loud enough that they knew I could hear.” She joined the student team that helped organize the Mix It Up at Lunch Day.

WHAT IS PREJUDICE?

Research shows that people are born with something that makes them aware of who is in their group and who isn’t, according to psychology professor Keith Payne.

“The root of prejudice is drawing lines between who’s in your group and who’s not,” Payne says. But that doesn’t mean people are born believing that one race of people is superior to other races. Payne says people are quite capable of choosing to accept that individuals who look or act differently

from them can be fine companions. People can be tolerant even if their environment or the way they were brought up causes them to think less kindly about someone who is different from them.

“You can always expand your circle of who belongs in your group,” Payne says. “You don’t have to go with the first thought that comes to mind to reject someone. You can choose to set prejudice aside and act fairly.”



SAT/ACT WORDS

Discrimination: the act of favoring or disfavoring on a basis other than individual merit

Incentive: motivation to take action

Inseparable: incapable of being separated

Prejudice: a negative opinion formed without just grounds or before sufficient knowledge is obtained

Tolerance: sympathy for or indulgence of beliefs or practices different from or conflicting with one’s own

TEST YOURSELF

Are these statements true or false? Answers are in the Teacher’s Edition.

- 1 The idea behind Mix It Up at Lunch Day is to get students from different backgrounds to interact with one another just once and then not do it again. True False
- 2 Not every student participates in Mix It Up at Lunch Day voluntarily. Some students are required to do so. True False
- 3 Being prejudiced is something people are born with, therefore they have no control over whether they discriminate against others. True False
- 4 Mix It Up at Lunch Day is the only opportunity for students in schools to interact with kids who are different from themselves. True False

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 Whom do you eat lunch with? Do you always sit with the same people? How hard would it be to sit with someone you did not know well?
- 2 Keith Payne, the psychology professor quoted in the story, says, “The more you interact with people who seem different from you, the more you’re likely to realize that they’re really not as different as they seem.” What do you think he means?

“reminds you that everyone is an individual with a story. Last year, I sat with a quiet Mormon girl, and she told me she played soccer. We had this great conversation. I love to play soccer and play for the school, but I never would have guessed that she played too.”

Lauren Taylor is the faculty adviser to the groups at Century High School that organized Mix It Up at Lunch Day. “We don’t expect people to make a new best friend, but it gets kids out of their comfort zone, then changes what their comfort zone is,” she says.

Finding a Friend

It’s true that you probably won’t make a new best friend at Mix It Up at Lunch Day—but you might! That’s what happened for Alexis Armour and Katelinn McInroy, two sixth graders at Northley Middle School.

“We weren’t friends because she went to a different elementary school,” Alexis says. “I didn’t know her at all. Then, on Mix It Up at Lunch Day, she sat across from me and we just started talking.”

One thing led to another, and the two girls were soon **inseparable**. “I met some of her friends and became [their] friends, and she met some of mine—and now we have different groups we can sit with at lunch!” Katelinn says.

—Denise Rinaldo