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**Golden Gate High School**

**Creating a Classroom and Community of Kindness**

*Who we are and how this came to be (precipitating events necessitating new responses and appreciation for student strengths and needs):* The strength of a people and the power of a community can be revealed through one simple but powerful choice: the choice of kindness. The ways in which we act and react to one another on a daily basis through thoughtful demonstrations of goodwill, generosity, and selflessness can transform a person, a people, the world. So where do we start? We start in the classroom. The place where our children come together each day to learn and to grow, to become productive members of society, to build the next generation of social thinkers and doers. At Golden Gate High School, we start as soon as these young people walk through the doors. We don't always know what doors they're walking out from, be it one filled with stability, strength, and positivity, or one crumbling with dysfunction, poverty, and instability. But we do know what "golden gate" we walk them through each morning: one that starts and ends with respect for self and others, promotes safety and an environment conducive for learning, and shows genuine care that permeates every action we take, every smile and laugh we share, every learning "aha" we create together. All of this comes together with kindness. Kindness teaches students the importance of respecting others, no matter what religious, racial, cultural, or other differences exist. Kindness teaches students how to counter bigotry and bullying and stand up for justice. Kindness teaches us ALL how to be better human beings.

So, who are the Golden Gate Titans, and how do we actively work together to promote kindness throughout our school (and ultimately to our Golden Gate community and beyond)? Well, it goes without saying that we are a wonderfully diverse community of learners, with 1,661 beautifully unique students (1,391, or 84%, are economically needy; 17% are English language learners; 18% are ESE; 79% speak a home language other than English). Thus, our school's mission statement, which is to establish academic excellence in all students by growing positive, responsible citizens through challenging curricula within a safe learning environment, is no simple task. Yet our teachers are up for the challenge. We understand and appreciate the vision to graduate all students with the life skills and academic knowledge necessary for college and career readiness (and I would add life readiness and happiness). How do we do that? Daily kindness.

Our kiddos have gone through so much over these past three years. Covid has transformed their lives in ways we as adults can never experience or imagine. We can only empathize and support these students as they navigate waters we've never dreamed of. Our students come to us each day with incredible strengths, diverse backgrounds, an array of home responsibilities, as well as their own unique hopes, dreams, fears, and worries. As such, we need to support our students as they grow in this new world and new way of living we're all striving (and thriving) in. Through daily kindness, we as educators show immediate and genuine respect for the young people we have the pleasure of working with and learning alongside each day. We get to know them, maintain consistent and people-first communication and language, acknowledge and respect every student, practice cultural sensitivity, and enjoy the process of growing and learning as a

community, adults and students alike. Each teacher has taken his/her own approaches in creating the best space for their particular students. These students then spread that personalized kindness to their classmates, then take that kindness home and to work and to the outside community.

My own English classroom is a microcosm of this larger population. For our little neck of the woods, I personally have focused on creating a classroom community of kindness and cooperation through the student-centered, warm demander learning environment approach. So what does this look like? I teach English and intensive reading to ninth and tenth graders. With these younger high school students, establishing and maintaining healthy, authentic, and effective relationships in a student-centered classroom is one of the single most important factors in school environments and student achievement today. A current review of educational research analysis of 46 separate studies found that strong and appropriate teacher-student relationships held positive correlations to short and long term improvements for students in academic achievement, attendance, and behaviors (Sparks). We as educators must always be aware of how integral we are to our students' learning, academically, emotionally, and socially. Ever since I was a second grader, knee high to a grasshopper, I knew that I was going to be a teacher (I think I was born to be a teacher, actually), and it's because of the kind, loving, warm, and friendly environments that so many of former educators created. Through my successes and struggles in secondary school, I knew that I always had someone in my corner who supported me in my journey, pushed me to do the best I could, and loved me no matter the outcome. Now as a teacher entering my twenty-first year, I continue to strive to be that same model and support system for my own students that I received for so many years. Each day I learn more and more from my kiddos, and each year I continue to strive to be the best support I can be for them. They deserve it. Thus, I strive to create a classroom community of kindness, where I as the warm demander provide support, create comfortable routines and procedures, build relationships, foster resilience, share excitement, and hold high expectations for us all. Establishing and maintaining effective relationships creates a student-centered, learning-conducive classroom where all stakeholders from students to parents to teachers to administrators to community members all feel safe, respected, and valued.

One example of what this looks like in my classroom is through our positive, student-centered classroom routines and procedures. From the start of class to the end, students thrive in a low-stress, high expectations, step-by-step classroom routine process where stressful surprises or confusions are minimized. I greet students at the door (and remind them that each day starts fresh and new and holds great opportunities) with a warm (albeit currently masked) smile and a hello (and a silly joke on our hall whiteboard). Soft music plays in the background. Lighting is not overwhelming or uncomfortable. The classroom is accessible for all. Students are partnered with a fellow classmate who they feel comfortable with. When the bell rings, students are respectfully instructed to make their ways to their seats, turn off all unnecessarily electronic devices, and begin their start-up (a character trait based on famous quotes from world leaders with learning messages such as kindness, loyalty, patriotism, caring, reflection). We then discuss the start-up and how they can apply it to their lives each day, and students are asked to volunteer to share their thoughts.

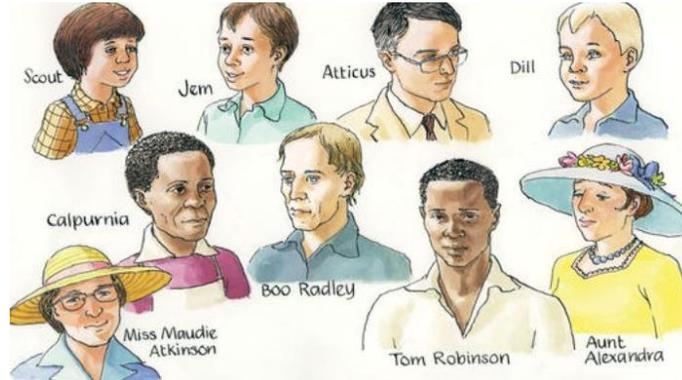
From there we review our daily learning agenda, academic scales and standards, and how they will demonstrate understanding and mastery (and ultimately find success). Students are always encouraged to ask questions to either clarify or expand on their thinking, strengths, and needs. We then proceed into the standards-based, grade level daily lesson which follows the gradual release model of explicit modeling to small group practice to individual demonstration of mastery. We build background knowledge, add to the wealth of what students already know, ask clarifying questions, and demonstrate understanding in a variety of student learning, student-centered methods such as verbally, visually, or kinesthetically. Students work with pre-determined shoulder partners to strengthen their understanding and support one another. We engage in whole and small group discussions to demonstrate our understanding. At the end of class, students reflect on their learning with exit slips before I thank them for their time and they head to their next class. Student work samples are proudly displayed within the classroom and outside in the English building 5 hallways. These routines and procedures allow students to know what I expect of them, what they can expect from me, and what they can expect from one another. There are no stressful surprises or confusion; instead, there is thoughtful structure and support. This creates a safe classroom environment conducive for learning. It's a place where all of my students can strive and thrive. Each student is honored for who she, he, or they are.

I know this practice is making a difference just by the way students enter my classroom. I can see them take deep, cleansing, thankful breaths. I can see the stress melt away off of their faces. I can see them settle in. I can also see how they want to prove themselves, to volunteer to answer a question, to bring up an awesome discussion point, to get their work sample hung up on the wall. I can see it in the way that my students engage with their work, smile and laugh and work with one another and interact with me. They feel comfortable asking me questions, expressing frustration, asking for help. I have positive relationships with my students, and so many have joined my student clubs: Key Club (which engages in community service in and outside of Golden Gate), Garden Club (we partnered with the Naples Botanical Gardens to create a GGHS Mindfulness flower and veggie garden last year during the pandemic; this year our GGHS Science Department will be taking over and conducting experiments as we expand out with hydroponics and butterfly gardens), and our Yellow Tulip Project Club (where we work within our school and the outside community to “smash the stigma” of mental health and promote positive communities for all people). Finally, I continually ask students for honest feedback in the form of anonymous surveys which I give out every quarter. Students provide feedback for how they feel about our classroom environment and community, what they like, what they need, etc. This feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with 100% of students in all classes (I have two blocks of 9<sup>th</sup> graders, 1 period of 10<sup>th</sup> graders, and 1 period of AP Seminar students) feeling supported and respected “all of the time” or “most of the time” in our classes. This translates to how well they also work alongside and support one another and how engaged they are. When students feel safe and supported, they feel safe to take chances, to explore, to expose themselves to new ideas, to grow. Those daily “aha!” moments are beautiful and I cherish them!

Sparks, S. D. (2021). “Why Teacher-Student Relationships Matter.” *Education Week*. Retrieved October 10, 2021, from <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/why-teacher-student-relationships-matter/2019/03>.

Specific unit lesson: *To Kill a Mockingbird*

“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb in his skin and walk around in it.” –Atticus Finch, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee



Is there really one world issue, event, or experience we can center in on? In 2021 our children witnessed (and in many cases experienced) increased worldwide migration crisis, with 84 million people forcibly displaced worldwide (the UN Refugee Agency); the Taliban return to power in Afghanistan, once again slowly stripping women of their rights and causing ethnic and religious minorities to brace for persecution; anti-Asian violence increases creating a heightened sense of insecurity as gun violence continues to skyrocket in the U.S.; verdicts in three major murder trials (the death of George Floyd at the hands of Derek Chauvin, Kyle Rittenhouse against Black Lives Matters protestors, and the trial and convictions of three white men who murdered Ahmaud Arbery); a continued battle over voting rights in the U.S.; verdicts in #MeToo cases; and the sustained disgust over the January 6<sup>th</sup> U.S. Capitol insurrection. Our children were (and still are) inundated with the images, the sounds, and the emotions of these historical events. They need a structured and safe way to process them. For my classes, this is where *To Kill a Mockingbird* comes in.

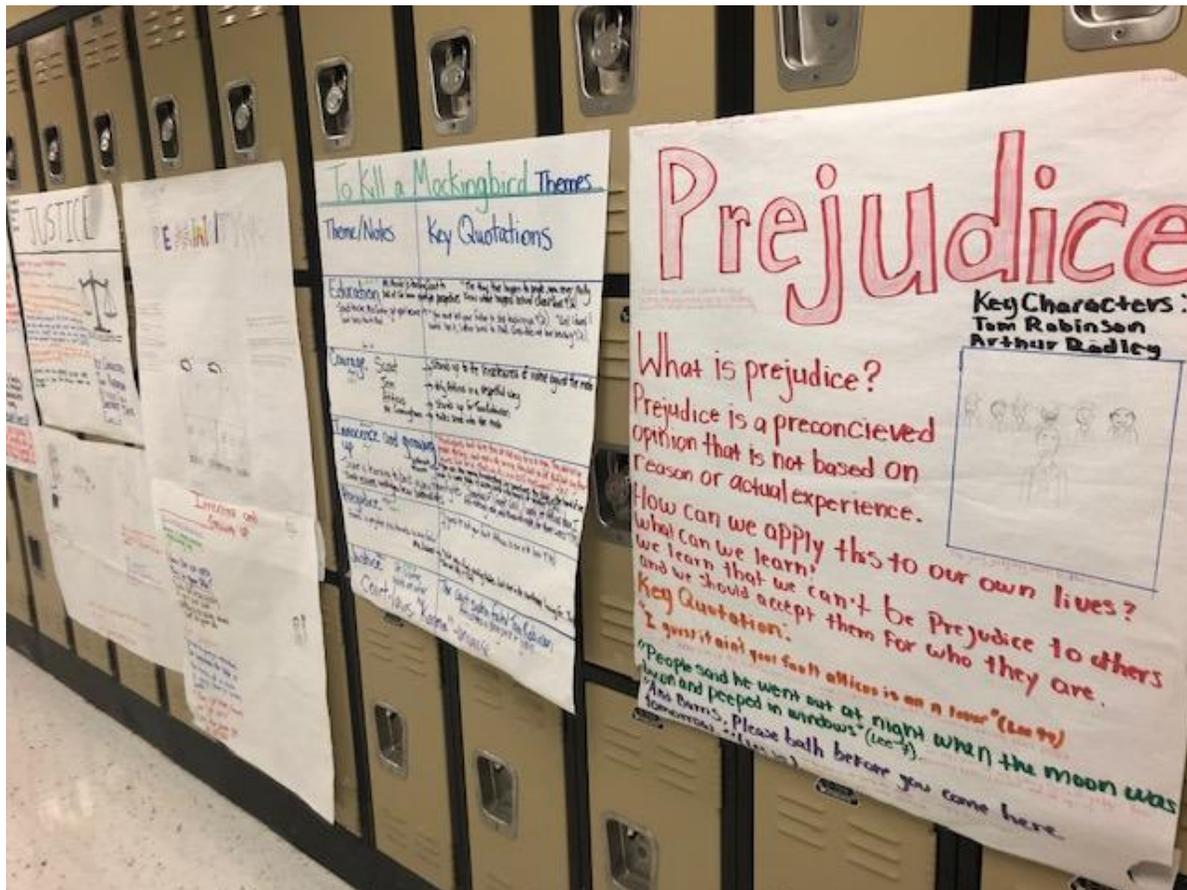
Each year I use *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a literary tool to help my students process their pasts and their presents. The messages and themes and character interactions and history allow students to explore similarities and differences, love versus hate, empathy versus misunderstanding, and the power of personal and societal acceptance and appreciation. Through this novel, my students are able to delve into the themes of gender, classism, racism, duty versus obligation, education, and growing up.

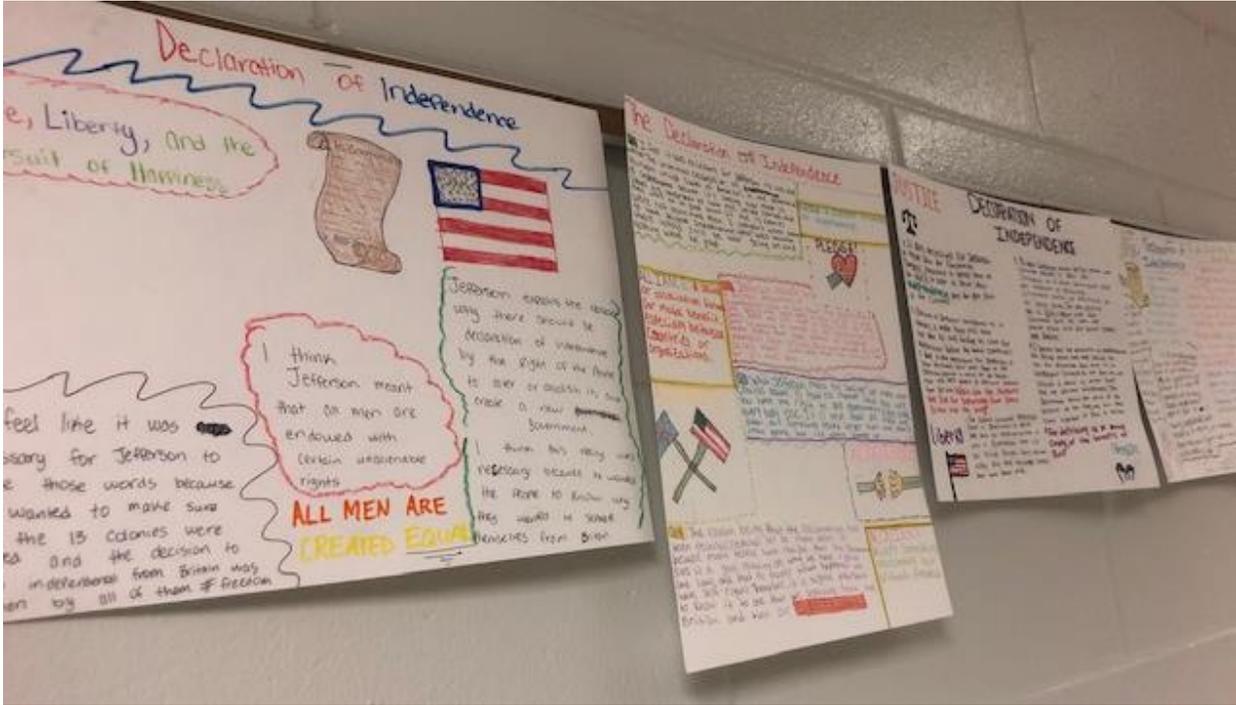
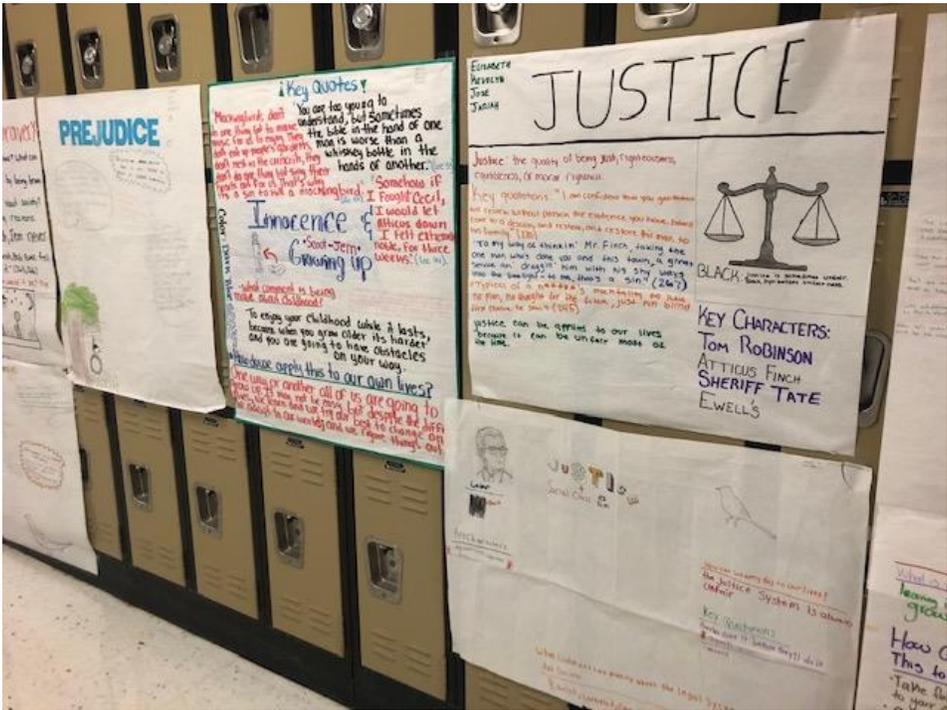
Each day after our character trait start-up (during this novel unit we focused on character trait quotes discussing respect, responsibility, and tolerance), we would explore the novel through character perspectives and thematic connections. I would model the fluent reading of the text

(the students like that I had different voices for different characters), and the students would follow along. We would stop at integral times in the novel to discuss and reflect and answer higher order thinking questions. We would also read and break down supplementary texts designed to help students build context (historical readings such as the Declaration of Independence and who it included and excluded; slavery in the U.S.; the Gettysburg Address; African American resistance through art; African American historical storytelling; post-Civil War migration; the Great Migration; the Harlem Renaissance; and various artists such as Claude McKay, W.E.B. Dubois, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston who were extremely influential in the celebration of African American life and people. We also compared Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech to Atticus Finch's Courtroom speech as a way to explore social and racial expectations, needs, and the use of ethos, logos, and pathos (rhetorical appeals) to appeal to audiences and share ideas.

This year students dug into the themes and created group posters (which are still on display in our school hallways) to break down the major themes of prejudice, gender norms, courage, education, innocence, and justice.

It was a great opportunity for them to make visual representations and connections of their ideas, ideas that carry throughout their everyday real lives.







Many of the lessons from *To Kill a Mockingbird* made my students uncomfortable, and that's a positive thing! They needed to sit in their discomfort and then make informed decisions on how to move forward, together. This novel, and our discussion and analysis of it, empowers my students! I have to thank my Assistant Principal of Curriculum, Mr. Norman Alford, for purchasing copies of the graphic novel of *To Kill a Mockingbird* so each student could have a copy.

Standards/skills explicitly taught, modeled, guided, and assessed: **Standard(s)/Benchmark(s):**  
**LAFS.910.RI.3.9:** Analyze U.S. documents of historical significance (seminal documents);  
**RL.1.1:** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text; **LAFS.910.RL.1.2** Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text. **LAFS.910.RL.1.3** Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme. **RL.2.4:** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone); **L.3.5:** Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings, as well as interpret figures of speech and analyze their role in text; **LAFS.910.L.1.1** Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking. a. Use parallel structure. b. Use various types of phrases (noun, verb, adjectival, adverbial, participial, prepositional, absolute) and clauses (independent, dependent; noun, relative, adverbial) to convey specific meanings and add variety and interest to writing or presentations.

History.com Editors. "2021 Events." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 20 Dec. 2021, <https://www.history.com/topics/21st-century/2021-events>.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Refugee Statistics." *UNHCR*, UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>.

### *So what's next? Continuing to Move Forward in Our Respect and Kindness for Others*

There's still much to be done, and each year my students amaze me in the ways they interact with and support one another and move forward with one another and throughout the community. We have so many great things happening at Golden Gate High School, so let me highlight just a few:

a. Our GGHS Butterfly Garden: We were fortunate to "adopt" a group of Monarch butterfly caterpillars which snowballed into a second school garden! We now have a chrysalis nursery (a little greenhouse) and a bunch of milkweed that the baby caterpillars are munching on. The

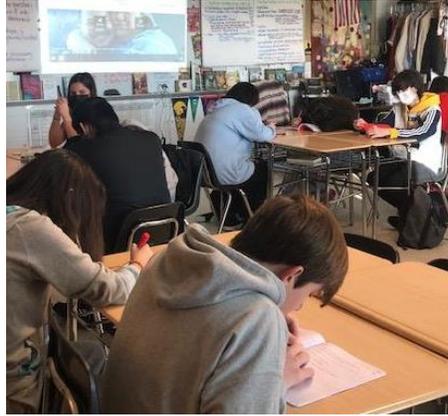
students love creating this safe and happy space for all to use, and each day you can see students peeking into the greenhouse, reading a book by the entrance, and walking through the flowers. We plan on growing this garden and adding to it (and yes, we are dreamers and want to one day turn our entire school into one big butterfly garden).



b. In an effort to promote individual and group pride, I've encouraged our kiddos to take pictures of their lives, demonstrating their perspectives and what they see and feel. Some of my students have taken pictures of our school garden, images of students working together, drawn pictures of themselves or their interests, or made posters for causes near and dear to them such as LGBTQ+ rights. We have been proudly displaying them around our walls in the English department building 5. We will continue to add to these displays until we run out of wall space. Then I guess we'll have to move to the ceilings!



c. We are also continuing our exploration and celebration of others through our weekly Story Corps “great listening” and analysis activities. Each Friday NPR’s Story Corps shares an interview between two people about a moment, experience, or feeling that is impactful in some way. My students listen to the Story Corps interview, summarize it, and relate it to their own lives, reflecting on how they can connect to the interviewed, connect to the story or experience, and learn from it in some way as they continue on their journey of growth and find their ways (and voices and power) in this world.



Here they are reflecting. They’re such great kids; they truly make me smile each day. ☺

d. It’s Black History Month, so this week my students and I are engaging in a number of readings and virtual field trips (like to the Smithsonian Museum of African American History) to dive into so many of the beautiful triumphs (and struggles) of African Americans throughout history. At the end of the week my students will be entering in a poster creation contest put on by our Golden Gate High School Diversity Club!

e. Our Yellow Tulip Club (the student-led club dedicated to spreading awareness about mental health and “smashing the stigma” of mental health issues) has already painted clay tulips that we’ve placed around our Free Lending Library (a little lending library that my students keep stocked with donated books and where anyone can add to, borrow, or take books). We will be adding sunflowers and marigolds around the area soon!



f. We recently analyzed a series of text set readings discussing NY City's 2012 soda ban. Students were talking about how beneficial it would be for our school to have a healthy food snack station. After speaking with our Assistant Principal Norman Alford, and aligned ourselves with the district's Blue Zone health initiative, we are hoping to build a healthy fruit and veggie selling stand! Eventually, as we grow our garden, we are hoping to sell some of our own produce (small cherry tomatoes, green beans, strawberries, etc.). The past few years my students and I read SEEDFOLKS, an incredible book about an inner-city garden that was started by accident and how it helped connect a once isolated community. I love this book, as do the students, and it brings together characters, identities, perspectives, and histories as diverse as the vegetables in the garden: Kim, a young girl from Vietnam; Gonzalo, a teenage from Guatemala; Sam, an elderly Jewish man whose mission is to promote pacifism and international cooperation; Virgil, a young boy from Haiti; and so many more rich characters. Through this book my students realize that we are all SEEDFOLKS in our own way, and that we are stronger and make more meaningful communities and connections when we come together. I lent these books to another class (I share all of my lesson plans and resources district-wide, for sharing is caring) and they didn't come back in very good condition. So, the media specialist is trying to get some copies for us so that we can continue with this awesome novella at the end of the school year after we also read *Of Mice and Men* (another incredible novella). In the meantime, we can continue with our garden and our fruit and veggie stand which we are trying to name right now (as of now it's "The Gate Garden Café" name we're leaning towards). ☺

g. And finally, our students noticed that many of their classmates are still sitting and eating lunch alone, often finding dark corners and sitting on the ground. NO ONE SHOULD SIT ON THE GROUND for lunch, and NO ONE SHOULD SIT ALONE! So, my students proposed yet another idea to our administration: a little café table area by our hydroponics station (we started a hydroponics station alongside our garden which we are going to try to turn into an aquaponics soon by adding fish...wish us luck!). They want to work alongside our GGHS Key Club (which I sponsor) to purchase some café tables and chairs, plant some flowers in boxes, and make a meeting space that is quieter yet still supervised by a teacher (that is me) and where students can interact if they choose but also sit quietly and reflect and enjoy nature as they eat lunch if that's what they prefer. They can sit alone at a bistro table, but they won't be alone, and that's a beautiful thing.

Current area we plan on sprucing up:



My kiddos at Golden Gate High School are incredible young people who will do great things in this world! For now, we're focusing on our little neck of the woods. By creating a classroom and school community of kindness, my students are able to explore, understand, and demonstrate the importance of respecting others no matter what religious, racial, cultural, or other differences exist. My students are standing up for themselves, their friends, their families, their communities, and their futures. Every interaction we have with them makes a difference, and each day I am truly blessed to be surrounded by such wonderful young people who will make this world a better place. Thank you for allowing us to share just a little bit of it with you!