

FACILITATING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS IN SCHOOLS

How leaders can navigate conversations on polarizing topics with empathy, self-awareness, and critical thinking

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1 | INTRODUCTION

In today's divided society, it is vital for educational leaders to effectively guide their communities through challenging conversations.

As stewards of educational integrity and your school community, school leaders like you are uniquely positioned to champion the practice of informed, respectful, and productive dialogue in the face of deep polarization and political upheaval.

This white paper is designed to examine the pivotal role administrators and academic leads play in fostering environments where controversial topics can be discussed constructively and offer insight into Facing History & Ourselves' robust framework for engaging in and facilitating these difficult conversations. By promoting a culture of dialogue and reflection, Facing History helps schools become places where every member can contribute to a more informed, thoughtful society. The tools shared here aim to build understanding and establish common ground rather than win arguments. Essential to this approach is the development of skills necessary for civil discourse, such as active listening, genuine connection with others, and respect for differing viewpoints

'Civil discourse' refers to a framework that allows us to show up with our mind, heart, and conscience and to be in dialogue and extend our understanding in connection with others. Often, civil discourse overlaps with and includes **"crucial" or difficult conversations**, which Facing History defines as conversations that touch on emotional topics or spark controversy between students. They can also be defined as conversations about issues where there are multiple, competing "right" answers. These kinds of conversations can be difficult for students, school leaders, and teachers, but they are crucial because they help us practice the skills necessary to be active participants in a diverse democracy - a democracy that requires all of us to work together to build strong communities, even across our many differences.

Facing History believes fostering civil discourse in schools is vital because schools are a cornerstone of democracy. It takes intentional work, commitment, and a supportive environment to help students and educators live into the shared ideals of a democratic society. We know that schools are some of the most politically and culturally diverse places in our communities. This reality means that they are also one of the most important training grounds for young people in developing their civil dialogue skills and senses of civic responsibility.

With this in mind, many educators are eager to engage students in lessons and conversations about current events and controversial topics, and yet they may not always feel equipped or supported in doing so. Many look to their school leadership for guidance, training, or permission that can be hard to come by.

There are also important learning outcomes that students can attain by engaging in civil discourse. Students develop knowledge, skills, and informed civic responsibility when they are invited into conversations that are emotionally engaging, intellectually challenging, and relevant to their own lives. In fact, [research shows](#) that when students engage in discussions of contemporary issues, they report being more engaged in school as well as a greater interest in politics, improved communication and critical thinking skills, increased civic knowledge, and a higher likelihood of participating in civic life as adults. Critical thinking is also vital for recognizing and addressing misinformation and counteracting extremist narratives with analysis of facts.

Utilizing the tools shared throughout this white paper can help you model for school and community stakeholders how to discuss current events, controversial issues, and historical dilemmas while cultivating an environment in which informed, emotionally intelligent, and respectful dialogue prevails. And, by leveraging the support and resources Facing History provides, school leaders can effectively address the challenges of polarization, ensuring that their schools are not only places of learning but also spaces where civic engagement is actively practiced and valued.

2 | THE PROBLEM OF POLARIZATION IN OUR COMMUNITIES & SCHOOLS

Conversations about difficult topics can focus on public policies, societal issues, controversial issues, and current events. Education researchers Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy note that classrooms should be places in which students engage in discussions rooted in inquiry and that explore questions like, “How should we live together?” and topics that help prepare young people for life in a community and in a democratic society.¹

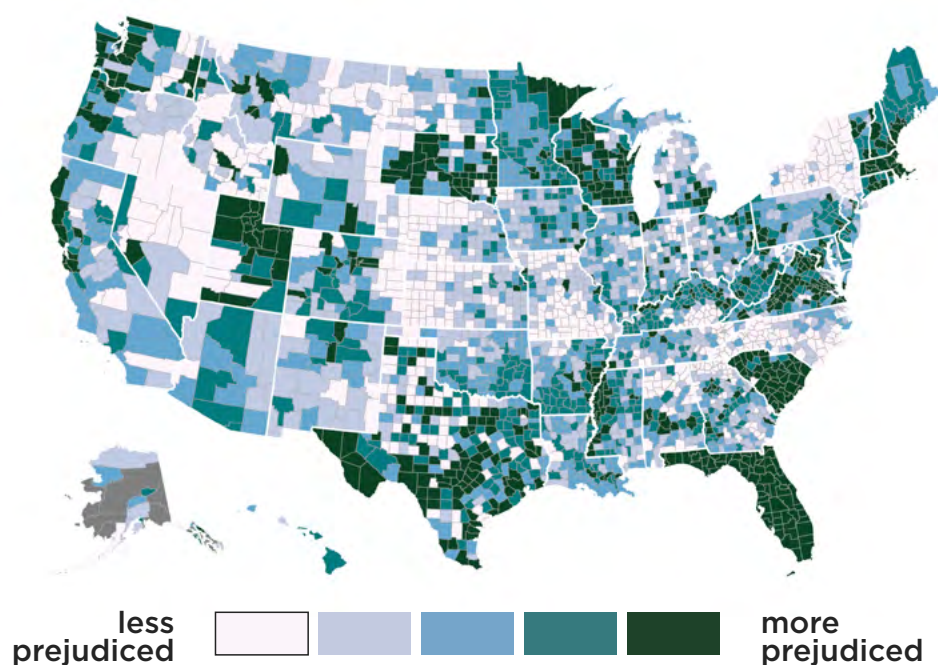
¹ Paula McAvoy, “Political Discussions in the Classroom: What Should Educators Be Trying to Do?,” The Line (Frontline Education), 2019.

Discussions about political topics, in particular, often highlight the deep fissures that exist within our civic community. **Political polarization**, such as what society faces today, refers to moments in time when political discourse and action bifurcates toward ideological extremes.

We know that the impact of this polarization can be profound: In addition to crowding out voices in the middle, leaving less room for political compromise, it can lead to increased stress and anxiety, as well as a diminished ability to process differing opinions. This can erode the sense of a belonging and cohesive culture within our communities and increase feelings of isolation or marginalization. Recent research shows that political polarization, especially what Dr. Diana Hess refers to as **affective polarization**, is affecting young people and adults alike in their valuing of people with different views than themselves — regarding people with similar views more highly than those with different views.

In the **March 4, 2019 Issue of *The Atlantic***, the below map was published to illustrate the prominence of political prejudice across the thousands of counties in the United States. The political rhetoric society is immersed in right now indicates not only an increase in unfavorable attitudes toward people of different political parties, but impressions that those people are a threat to the nation's well-being.

Overall Political Prejudice



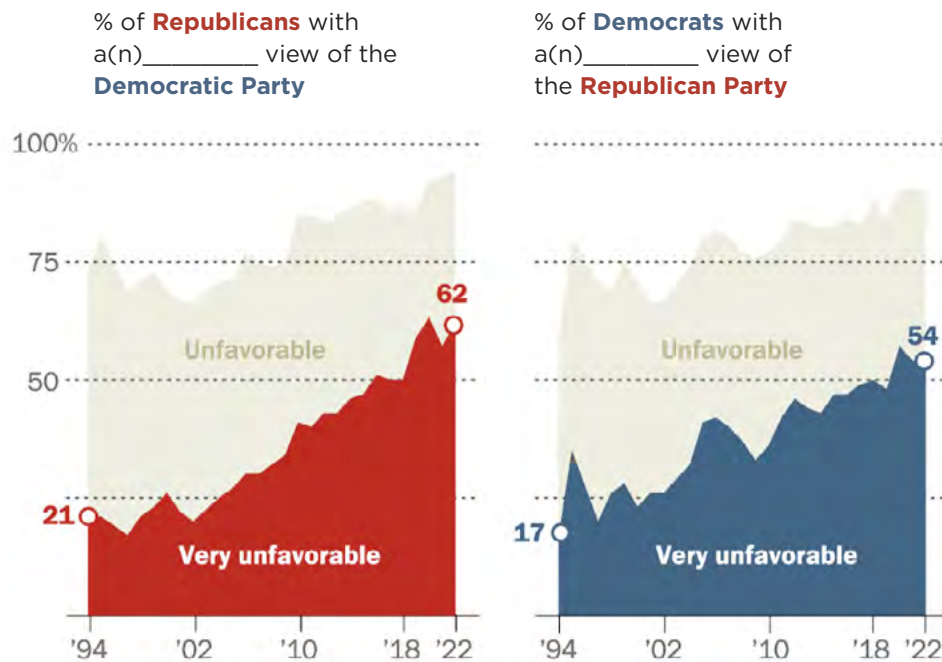
Political intolerance seems to vary significantly within the country, according to the analysis. In some places, Americans seem to be quicker to stereotype and dismiss one another based on political differences. In other places, people tend to be more accepting, even when they disagree. Like all modeled data, these results are imperfect; we did not survey every American. But the variation suggests intriguing differences from place to place.

Source: PredictWise

² Pew Research Center, August 2022, "As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration With the Two Party System" *The Line* (Frontline Education), 2019.

These findings are especially relevant for school leaders as you must consider the impacts of polarization not only on students, but throughout the entire educational ecosystem. This includes teachers, staff, families, and community members, all of whom are affected by the ideological divides that can disrupt the learning environment.

Two decades of rising partisan antipathy ²



²Pew Research Center, August 2022, [“As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration With the Two Party System”](#)

3 | SOLUTIONS

Effective leadership requires a comprehensive approach in order to foster a culture of dialogue and understanding that transcends the classroom and builds a culture of belonging that permeates the entire district and school community.

To address the increasing polarization and its potential to disrupt learning environments, this section presents a roadmap for school leaders committed to nurturing civil discourse within their communities. By first distinguishing between civil discourse and debate, then equipping staff with a unified approach, and finally, honing school leaders' and teachers' skills to facilitate critical conversations, we can create a culture where respectful dialogue thrives, benefiting students, staff, and the wider community alike.

DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN CIVIL DISCOURSE AND DEBATE

At its core civil discourse has a different purpose, approach and outcome than debates. Creating a shared understanding among staff and students of what civil discourse is and how it differs from debate is an important initial step in helping ensure everyone can engage in conversations about polarizing issues when they come up. Here are three things to consider as you develop an understanding of civil discourse and how it differs from debate:

- **Purpose:** Debate aims to win an argument, while civil discourse is a means to create shared understanding with mutual respect and open dialogue.
- **Approach:** Debate involves defending fixed positions and may use assertive language, whereas civil discourse encourages active listening and calm, considerate conversation.
- **Outcome:** Debate focuses on proving one side correct, while civil discourse emphasizes finding common ground and valuing diverse perspectives.

The Better Arguments Project outlines several principles of a “better argument” in that foster civil discourse:

Civil discourse is:

- respectful and constructive conversation, even when people disagree
- actively listening to others
- expressing your thoughts clearly and politely
- being open to different viewpoints
- intended to find common ground and mutual understanding, not to win an argument

Civil discourse is not:

- hostile or aggressive
- a fight or debate
- agreeing for sake of politeness
- for spreading misinformation or disinformation or to convince someone to adopt your views
- dismissive of differing perspectives

EQUIP YOUR STAFF WITH A SCHOOL-WIDE APPROACH TO CIVIL DISCOURSE

To foster a culture of civil discourse within your school, it is essential to equip your staff with a comprehensive, school-wide approach that embraces of opinion, thought, and experience; sets clear goals and norms; and selects thoughtful and relevant discussion topics tied to student learning. In doing so it is also recommended school leaders and educators work together to identify topics that can or should be addressed and classrooms and those which may not be appropriate for your context and why. By providing high-quality, researched-backed materials, developing robust lesson plans, and deliberately teaching the skills necessary for effective dialogue, educators can create an environment where students feel included, challenged, and respected.

To do this, we recommend these **constructive elements of fostering civil discourse**, drawn from [our free guide](#), to help your staff cultivate meaningful conversations and debrief both the content and process of discussions, ensuring continuous growth and improvement.

Start with yourself and consider your role in fostering civil discourse within your school. Reflect on how your identity, position, and personal experiences shape your interactions with staff and the broader school community. What steps can you take to ensure that your communications are respectful and inclusive, and how can you model the kind of civil discourse you want to see? Consider how actively listening, validating perspectives, and responding thoughtfully can set a powerful example for your entire team.

Coordinate with colleagues and caregivers. To effectively coordinate with colleagues and caregivers in fostering civil discourse, it's critical to maintain open and clear communication channels. Engage with your colleagues to discuss the topics and materials they plan to introduce in their classrooms, to understand the approach and where they may need guidance or support.

When communicating with caregivers, especially about difficult topics or in times of turmoil, prioritize transparency and empathy. Establish regular, open lines of communication to share the school's approach to fostering civil discourse, including the selection of topics and the strategies used to ensure respectful and inclusive discussions. When addressing sensitive issues, listen actively to caregivers' concerns and perspectives, and provide clear, thoughtful responses that affirm their values and address their questions. Offering resources and support, such as [guides on handling controversial topics](#) and media literacy materials, can help caregivers feel more informed and aligned with the school's goals, fostering a collaborative and supportive community.

Co-create community norms. Establish shared norms and clear goals for engaging in that contribute to high-quality and civil discourse. Consider how to help students feel included and foster a sense of belonging in both the school and classroom and also challenge them to consider multiple and competing perspectives. You can set the tone by establishing school-wide norms and also support teachers to co-develop and return to a [classroom contract](#) with their students.

Identify discussion topics and strategies aligned to your goals. Even in communities that are politically homogeneous, research shows there is generally political diversity within the classrooms of those communities. Take advantage of the different perspectives and experiences in your midst. Help teachers consider and support this diversity as they plan discussions in their classrooms. Consider what makes some topics or issues better for discussion than others.

Establishing clear criteria about suitable topics can help teachers determine how to craft discussion questions for their classroom. You can also set aside time and space for teachers in subject area groups to reflect together and discuss the extent to which various topics would be categorized as “open,” “settled,” or “not yet” questions for discussion that align to their content area.

Reflect & debrief. To effectively continue to integrate the practices and conditions needed for fostering civil discourse, regularly follow-up with teachers to hear about what’s coming up in classrooms, what’s going well, and where they need more support. Facilitate structured sessions where teachers can share insights and challenges they encounter with divisive or controversial topics. Encourage teachers to evaluate the discussion formats they use, the skills students practice, and the overall quality of the exchanges. Use tools like exit tickets to gather student feedback, which can inform future discussions and improve teaching strategies. Debriefing fosters a constructive and growth-oriented environment, focusing on learning and improvement rather than assigning blame or making accusations. By supporting ongoing reflection, leaders can help teachers refine their approaches and better prepare for future civil discourse activities.

“ **What if these conversations are not actually difficult, but simply unpracticed?** ”

Derisa Grant

REFINE YOUR FACILITATION SKILLS FOR DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Knowing how to engage in healthy dialogue is key to developing relationships with people outside our immediate social “bubbles” and broadening our perspectives and awareness of those who hold different views and beliefs. Healthy dialogue is characterized by open, respectful exchanges where diverse viewpoints, rooted in factual information are encouraged and valued. This type of dialogue promotes critical thinking, empathy, and understanding. To help you facilitate these difficult conversations and model positive civil discourse, we introduce “The Straight A’s” framework. This approach, developed by Diane J. Goodman, Ed.D., offers a practical guide to refine your skills in affirming, acknowledging, asking, adding, assessing, addressing, and appreciating diverse perspectives.

³ Derisa Grant, “On ‘Difficult’ Conversations,” *Inside Higher Ed*, July 14, 2020.

By adopting this framework, you can foster open dialogue, build trust, and create an inclusive environment where all voices are heard and valued. Let's explore each step of "The Straight A's" to enhance your leadership in managing these important discussions. "The Straight A's" have been reproduced with permission from [Diane J. Goodman, Ed.D.](#)

AFFIRM | Affirm and appreciate people's willingness to have a conversation.

Examples:

- I'm glad you brought that up.
 - I'm glad we have the opportunity to talk about this.
-

ASK | Ask questions to better understand their behavior, feelings, and perspectives and to help them reflect on their views. Be open and curious. Watch your tone. Continue to explore until they feel heard.

Examples:

- Can you tell me more about how you came to think that?
 - What experiences led you to that belief?
 - How were you feeling when...?
-

ADD | Relate and then offer additional information. First, try to connect with what they are saying.

Examples:

- I can understand how you might feel/think this way.
- I've had a similar experience.
- I've had thoughts/questions like that also.
- I'm also concerned about ...

Add other experiences, information, historical/social/political context, alternative explanations, and/or the impact on you. Challenge misinformation and broaden people's perspectives.

Examples:

- I've had experiences that are quite different than what you've described.
- I've read some research suggesting that...
- I've learned that...
- Another way to look at it is...
- When I hear you say that, I feel...

ASSESS & ADDRESS | Assess their response and notice their body language.

Reflect on your own internal and external responses. How are you feeling? What's happening in your body? Decide on the best response.

Examples (to the other person):

- I'm wondering what you are thinking/feeling right now?
- You look... (doubtful, confused, etc.)
- I'm wondering how what I've shared has landed for you?

APPRECIATE | Appreciate their willingness to talk with you, share their thoughts/feelings, and listen to your perspective. Identify any follow up.

Examples:

- Thank you for taking the time to talk with me.
- I appreciate your willingness to hear my perspective.
- I appreciated you sharing your experiences/thoughts with me.
- I'm glad to talk again or share that resource with you.

4 | CONCLUSION

The journey towards fostering a more inclusive and empathetic society begins with the courage to engage in civil discourse and address controversial issues head-on. By embracing these challenging conversations, educators and leaders can pave the way for a future where understanding and respect transcend polarization. Facing History offers a wealth of resources designed to support this endeavor, providing educators with the tools needed to navigate these complex topics effectively. We invite you to explore these resources, including our learning events on teaching controversial issues in polarized times, professional development opportunities for schools and districts, and insights on the importance of civil discourse in overcoming polarization. By doing so, you will be equipped to cultivate a learning environment that not only addresses the pressing issues of today but also prepares students to become thoughtful, informed citizens of tomorrow.

RESOURCES

- Facing History & Ourselves, [“Teaching about Controversial Issues in Polarized Times”](#), on-demand webinar.
- Facing History & Ourselves, [“Political Polarization in the United States”](#), last updated August 26, 2024.
- Facing History & Ourselves, [“Fostering Civil Discourse: Difficult Classroom Conversations in a Diverse Democracy”](#), last updated September 12, 2024.
- Facing History & Ourselves, [“Talking About Issues That Matter with Teens: Parent/Caregiver Guide”](#), last updated September 12, 2023.
- Facing History & Ourselves, [“Contracting”](#), last updated June 16, 2022.
- Facing History & Ourselves, [“Straight A’s for Facilitating Crucial Conversations”](#), last updated September 26, 2023.
- Facing History & Ourselves, [“Overcoming Polarization: The Importance of Civil Discourse in a Divided World”](#), last updated May 21, 2024.
- Facing History & Ourselves, [“Strategies for Parents & Teens: Current Events”](#), last updated September 12, 2023.



People make choices. **Choices make history.**

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