




# Standing Up Against Hate

BY MICA POLLOCK

The past year has been fraught for students, teachers and schools. We've seen a spike in incidents of hate and bias on K-12 and college campuses nationwide. It's becoming obvious that every insult overheard on the nightly news, every tweet forwarded on social media and every slur scrawled on a building can have mounting consequences for students and schools. Public figures are explicitly threatening many students' rights and communities. Students are repeating these threats and claims to one another, sometimes without fully understanding them.

And simultaneously, some educators are getting labeled "partisan" if they simply challenge hate or bullying on their own campuses—or engage students in dialogue about real, controversial issues, or just affirm that all students have the right to learn safely in school.

This reality places a burden on educators, to be sure. But no matter our "politics," standing up against hate—and for learning—is the basic work of education. And who better than us to facilitate it?



Educators have many responsibilities. Three have been heightened in the past year:

- Stand up against hate and intimidation, so schools stay safe for learning;
- Engage the facts;
- Protect the right to learn.

We've always had those responsibilities; they're just more necessary now than ever.

## STAND UP AGAINST HATE AND INTIMIDATION

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We're in an era of escalating hate and threat toward many of the young people and communities we serve. Undocumented and refugee students have been told that the president wants them out. The federal government is sending the message that schools don't have to honor LGBT students' identities. Boys have heard that disrespecting girls is OK. We've all heard racist, Islamophobic and xenophobic talk become more commonplace, accompanied by targeted policies. These sentiments get repeated on our campuses. Hate-filled violence is on the rise.

And as educators, it's our job to denounce hate and intimidation where we work, to make sure students feel safe to learn.

The U.S. Constitution protects a range of free expression rights in schools. Freedom of speech protects us all, so we don't simply outlaw all "offensive" ideas from our schools.

But we don't allow true threats of harm in schools, either, because schools must remain safe for learning. Our civil rights laws also require educators to protect public school students from harassment based on race, color, national origin, sex, religion or disability because a school has a responsibility to maintain a safe and nondiscriminatory learning environment for all students. When hostile environments impede student learning, educators must take action to end the harassment, eliminate any hostile environment and its effects, and prevent the harassment from recurring.

Put these points together, and we see that schools are places where hateful speech and action, harassment and violence are supposed to be challenged, not ignored. As educators, we are both legally and morally responsible for fostering learning environments where people aren't denigrated

and threatened so that students can participate in and benefit from school.

Educators must always model what it looks like to be an upstander: to stand up in the moment to challenge hateful speech and call instead for learning and respect. And the primary antidote to hate is preventive speech: continually talking about how to respect and value other human beings every day.

The triage work of educators is to challenge hate—to ask speakers to respect and value others so all can learn. The longer-term work is to prevent hateful activity on campus. And the longest-term, most powerful work is to make our resistance to hate routine, by consistently asking whether the most ordinary words we use in schools and society distort, misunderstand, misrepresent, denigrate or devalue people.



### Here are a few ideas for how to prevent hateful activity on campus:

- State, publicly and often, that harassment and intimidation have no place in our schools and that our campuses respect and value everyone so everyone can learn;
- Share powerful statements about the value of diversity and inclusivity written by K12 or university administrators, educators or students;
- Display posters articulating that, while hate is not welcome at our schools, students and ideas are;
- Partner with local organizations to spread anti-hate messaging;
- Refuse to downplay slurs and hateful speech as inconsequential events;
- Showcase inspiring examples of schools, communities, teachers and students resisting hate, promoting dialogue and building relationships;
- Bring effective tools for open dialogue to our schools such as restorative justice circles, Socratic dialogues and basic scaffolds for classroom dialogue about controversial topics. Explicitly teach the skill of discussing opposing views.

## ENGAGE THE FACTS

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The foundational work of counteracting hate is addressing the everyday forms of bias and misinformation all around us—the deeper, routine misconceptions about “types of people” under the n-word, prompting the swastika and behind that anti-immigrant scrawl on the ground. As I argue in more detail in *Schooltalk*, pursuing accurate claims and more informed understanding of our students, communities, country and world is actually key to education equity effort of all kinds. Hate, bias and passivity toward harm to others all thrive on a lack of knowledge. We stand up for one another when we get more informed about fellow human beings and the world.

To counter the stereotypes and misinformation that seep into all of us, educators need to facilitate learning: about historical realities; about the shape of contemporary wealth, poverty and employment; about who landed here and why; and about the opportunities folks actually get or don’t get in the United States. With our students,

colleagues and even with ourselves, we need to question old myths that value some “types of people” over others; we need to learn the history of our nation and the facts about the people we hear some of our politicians denigrate. For this fact base, and to build the relationships that unite us, we also need to seek deeper knowledge about real, complex lives. That means knowing the realities that motivated neighbors to take the risk of immigrating or seeking refuge; the diversity that exists within religions or “races”; and the personal facts about people’s real lives, struggles, hard work, contributions, talents and hopes.

These shifts all begin with questioning what we typically say and what we think we know. Harvard Professor Ali Asani asks a wonderful starter question of students in our times: “How do you know what you know about Islam?”

Educators can make a difference by engaging in a daily quest to counteract misinformation with learning. In an era when the value of facts seems up for debate, educators need to trade in

solid data and true human stories.

Notably, as educators engage the facts, we’ll find ourselves holding our students and ourselves to a higher standard than the many public figures ready to disregard facts altogether. But now more than ever, we can’t back down from the quest to learn.

Engaging evidence is, of course, central to the Common Core and Next Generation Science Standards, which ask us to help students make evidence-based arguments in all grades and subjects. And crucially, striving for accuracy in describing other people, social issues and our country is not being “politically correct.” Engaging in the quest for evidence and inquiry is education itself—and necessary for democracy to function. In a nation where many adults are too polarized in their thinking to learn, schools may be the last place where Americans are asked to talk about and engage new information.

## PROTECT THE RIGHT TO LEARN

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As we embark on the long-haul work of counteracting hate and engaging facts, educators are also faced increasingly with the task of protecting students’ basic right to learn—and our own ability to teach about solid information, complicated social issues and real lives.

The number of stories about teachers asked to discontinue instructional activities is growing by the day. (Consider the teacher in New York who was told not to engage a longstanding, historically grounded lesson about Columbus Day because it was “too controversial” or the Oregon teacher who got a letter from parents angry that she might say something negative about Trump when teaching about the Magna

Carta.) More than ever, administrators today need to support teachers’ own ability to engage the facts and analyze issues across perspectives, while teachers build skills in supporting students to explore tough ideas.

Today, along with preventing harassment in school, the work of protecting the right to learn also increasingly includes insisting on 1) the value of public education itself; 2) the right of every child to attend a publicly-funded school accountable for supporting all students; and 3) the protection of students’ other basic civil rights in schools (e.g., the rights of undocumented immigrants and students with disabilities; student rights under Title VI and Title

IX; and more).

Protecting the right to learn is the basic work of education. And to develop the next generation, we can’t avoid facts and issues in classrooms because they are fraught or rope off inquiry into real-world issues as too “political” to discuss. Doing so would, as a student in San Diego, California, put it, leave young people “unprepared for participating in democracy.”

Educators in public schools are not supposed to be politically “partisan.” But that word requires clarification in 2017. Educators in Arlington, Virginia, have been critiqued for hanging up signs with phrases like “Diversity strengthens us” and “Science is real.”

The parents who complained called those messages too partisan and political for school.

Huh?

And so, we arrive at our deepest core tension.

Because some government actors

have promoted intolerance and distorted facts, teachers who speak up against hate or for students, facts and learning are accused of being “politically partisan.”

Educators must stand together to resist this message. Standing up to

hate is not partisan. Studying facts is not partisan. Learning about the experiences of real people is not partisan. All of these actions are the core of U.S. education. Period.

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As we resist hate and everyday bias—and engage fraught national issues and facts gracefully and earnestly in our classrooms—educators will glue the nation back together in the months and years to come. While others in the United States have stopped engaging across perspectives, educators and students are some of the last people still trying! And everything we say has the

power to shape the future of our children and our nation.

We’re better equipped for the job than anybody else: Engaging in dialogue across perspectives is our job. And we can equip ourselves and one another further for the task by sharing the many resources produced by support organizations and the ways we are working on everything above. It

just takes effort, resource sharing and a commitment to growth.

It’s an incredible time to be an educator. Let’s support each other in this work.



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