



ILLUSTRATION BY DONALD ELY

# Responding to Hateful Speech in Schools



**Mica Pollock**

**A**t schools across the country and in our communities, hate-filled speech has been on the rise as students (and adults) emulate divisive and derogatory language heard in national rhetoric and policy. #USvsHate ([www.usvshate.org](http://www.usvshate.org)), an initiative I've co-designed with educators, defines "hate" as any time people denigrate, disrespect, or harm an individual or group as if their identity makes them an inferior or less valuable type of person.

A 2017 national study from UCLA found that after the 2016 election, teachers saw "increased incivility, intolerance, and polarization in classrooms" and "an increase in students making derogatory remarks about other groups during class discussions." In a March 2019 follow-up study of 505 high school principals, *School and Society in the Age of Trump*, educators noted that students are "more and more willing to say outrageously racist, homophobic, 'whatever-phobic' things, believing it is their 'right' to do so." This year has unleashed new waves of anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic and anti-Black racism during nationwide protests for racial justice.

When students (or colleagues!) repeat explicitly racist, Islamophobic, xenophobic, homophobic, anti-Semitic, sexist, and just *cruel* talk at school, it's educators' responsibility to respond. (In my book *Schooltalk*, I offer suggestions for responding to adults' speech. Here, I address responses to student speech specifically.)

Lawyers will debate the details in some cases, but educators can hang on to some basic principles as they negotiate issues around student speech, whether face-to-face or online:

- Educators should never passively tolerate hateful speech. Instead, we *forbid* threat speech and harassment.
- We *challenge* all speech that denigrates or misrepresents "types of people."
- We *treasure* free speech, not as some "right" to disparage others without any consequences but as the *ability to discuss ideas*.

Each of these ways of handling speech is core to an educator's job.

## **We forbid threat speech and harassment.**

Under the law, threats of violence are off limits in schools. A speaker can't threaten others with violence in a school rally, in a comment in the hallway or classroom, online, or in a scrawl on the playground. There is "no constitutional right to be a bully," as *Sypniewski v. Warren Hills Board of Education* stipulates.

Harassment is also forbidden in schools. Our civil rights laws require educators to protect public school students from harassment or other discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex, religion, or disability and—after transgender student Gavin Grimm's August win in court—based on gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. A school must maintain a safe and nondiscriminatory learning environment for all students to protect their right to learn. By federal law and regulation, when hostile environments on campuses impede learning, educators must take action to eliminate the hostile environment and its effects and prevent the harassment from recurring.

Educators need to respond to even a single epithet or slur by making absolutely clear to students that we don't harass people in school, in person or online. We need to state publicly, proactively, confidently, collectively, and often

that hate, harassment, and intimidation have no place in our schools.

Clear and publicly available school policies against harassment can help foster safer learning environments. So can proactive activities where students are asked to respect, value, and learn from one another; to learn facts about communities and our shared society; and to promote messages of inclusion themselves. #USvsHate offers activities that support students to know and respect their peers—and to rethink and refuse the old, false ideas that lurk *under* hateful speech and frame some people as more valuable than others.

Educators can consider when formal punishment of harassers is needed to signal to a community that unlawful harassment is off-limits, while prioritizing restorative dialogues that get students to consider and repair the consequences and causes of their speech. While educators can restrict hateful student speech (like lunchroom chants) for causing material and substantial disruption, the most powerful response is preventative: to talk explicitly in classrooms, assemblies, and discussion groups about how words can hurt and about the harmful ideas behind them.

## **We challenge all speech that denigrates or misrepresents "types of people."**

Educators these days might hear students repeating cruel misinformation about communities of color, immigrants, or poor people, or openly praising white supremacy in class. The most important thing to do is *respond*. Educators should never stay silent in the face of speech devaluing or misrepresenting people. Instead, we should model what it looks like to challenge, engage, and question that speech and press openly for respect: "We don't say that here, because such language is harmful to people

and our community.” (Teaching Tolerance’s Speak Up at School initiative has other helpful sentence starters.) Even a derogatory remark said with a laugh requires a response: “Those words hurt people”; “Your comment has the effect of \_\_\_\_\_.”

It is also important to question *inaccurate* or false claims and to press instead for learning and the engagement of facts. Everyday talk (by students *and* adults) can distort other people’s families, cultures, histories, and neighborhoods and falsely deem some groups as less valuable, skilled, or deserving of opportunity. It’s our role to invite evidence-based reasoning, ongoing learning about complex social issues, and a deeper understanding of history and contemporary lives.\* (See *Schooltalk*, [usvsbate.org](http://usvsbate.org)’s “Professional Resources” and “Lessons” tabs, and [www.schooltalking.org](http://www.schooltalking.org) for professional development tools to frame responses.)

Though we don’t censor student perspectives that we simply disagree with politically or personally, we challenge speech that is harmful to others, inaccurate, or false. As a lawyer friend said to me, “Free speech gives you the right to speak your view, but not to avoid criticism for it.” Indeed, the U.S. Constitution protects the ability to challenge each other’s language and claims.

### We treasure free speech—meaning, the ability to discuss and debate ideas.

The ability to debate ideas and claims is a central educational value: If I just censor others’ ideas, they might later censor mine. It’s why we don’t preemptively outlaw all potentially “offensive” ideas or political speech from our students. It’s also why we don’t simply ban offensive ideas or political speech from our streets. We instead discuss speech’s content and consequences. We assess speech for its factual basis.

And to keep schools safe for discussing ideas, we must draw the line at harassment and threats so that we *can* debate ideas.

Passivity and silence are never the answer. If left undiscussed, an inaccurate claim can metastasize into hate. If left unchallenged, hateful speech can escalate into threat. We have seen nationally how leaders and influencers who fail to send clear signals to speakers voicing intimidation, distortion, and hate embolden more speakers to threaten with physical violence as well as words.

We treasure the freedom to debate ideas and perspectives in schools. And to protect schools as places for the discussion of ideas, we must *challenge* speech that distorts and degrades—and *forbid* any threat or harassment that endangers learning and lives. It’s our job. ●

\*As a scholar of antiracism, I do not define fact-based analysis of white privilege or critical analysis of “white supremacy” in U.S. history, law, and society as “hateful.” I consider such teaching essential.

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# #USVS HATE

## Dialogue Suggestions

#USvsHate offers activities that help students get to know and respect their peers, explore their society, and refuse “hate.” The following are initial suggestions for classroom dialogue that combine ideas from Teaching Tolerance’s *Speak Up at School* guide, the books *Everyday Antiracism* and *Schooltalk*, and more, and are meant to be used in tandem with #USvsHate’s other resources.

**Remember that your overall task is to support the safety and well-being of the students in your room, along with their learning.** For suggestions on setting norms for any dialogue—and on preparing to support specific populations who might feel vulnerable—see #USvsHate’s “Tools for Productive Anti-Hate Dialogue” (<http://usvsbate.org/tools-for-productive-group-dialogues/>).

#### Be a learner.

Our quest is to learn about real lives and our real society. There will be questions you won’t be able to answer on the spot. Just commit publicly to learning. (Your answer can always be, “Let me learn more about that,” or “Let’s learn more about that together.”)

**Ask people to speak their own truths and experiences but take care with making claims about communities or experiences other than their own.** It’s an educator’s job to request that all claims be based on evidence. You can always ask a speaker to rethink a statement about “other people,” requesting more factual evidence. “Interesting, Joe, where have you learned that? Let’s keep learning and make sure our claims are based on evidence.” “I can speak from my own experience, but it doesn’t mean others have experienced the same thing!”

#### Invite sharing, but don’t force it.

Remember that some students will feel particularly vulnerable in conversations about targeted identities. Never force sharing.

#### Add facts.

“People who have spent a long time learning on this issue want us to know that ....”

#### Stories stay. Lessons leave.

Respect privacy and build trust. Make sure people feel like they can share without being exposed to others outside of the classroom.

**Don’t “spotlight.”** Let people speak as group members if they want to, but never pressure someone to represent a group. Everyone is a complex individual with membership in multiple communities.

**Try challenging the script (the common but inaccurate or cruel thing said), more than the speaker.** (“In our society we sometimes hear people repeat that claim. But as we learn more about this issue, we realize that ....”) **or ask the speaker to act like a learner.** (“We all have a lot to learn on this. Let’s pursue a more accurate understanding of this issue by learning more about ....”)

**Don’t let anyone disparage any “type of person” without responding.** Consider some basic responses you can practice and have ready:

**Interrupt.** Speak up against every biased remark. (“I don’t like words like that.” “That phrase is hurtful.” “We don’t use slurs in this school.” “We don’t want to say that here because such language is harmful to others.” “Our school community is about respecting all.”) Point out that the comment hurts, regardless of the speaker’s intentions. (“That language hurts others, even if you didn’t mean to. Let’s make sure everyone is respected.”)

**Question.** Ask questions in response to hateful remarks, to find out why the speaker made the offensive comment and how you can best address the situation. (“Why did you make a statement like that? What do you mean?”)

**Educate.** Explain why a term or phrase is offensive. Encourage the person to choose a different expression. (“Do you know the history of that word?”)

**Echo.** If someone else speaks up against hate, thank her and reiterate her antibias message. (“Thanks for speaking up, Allison. I agree that word is offensive, and we shouldn’t use it.”)

#### Remember that the work is ongoing.

A framework to keep in mind is Teaching Tolerance’s Social Justice Standards, which present four “domains” of antibias work to address in all classrooms (identity, diversity, justice, and action).

Source: [UsvsHate.org](http://UsvsHate.org). Adapted with permission.