

**KEEPING THE FREEDOM TO INCLUDE: TEACHERS NAVIGATING  
“PUSHBACK” AND MARSHALLING “BACKUP” TO KEEP INCLUSION  
ON THE AGENDA**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper shares K12 educators’ efforts to marshal local support for the act of basic inclusion: welcoming all communities as equally valuable. We share data from a national pilot of #USvsHate (usvshate.org), an educator- and student-led “anti-hate” messaging project. In interviews, participating educators revealed careers of “pushback” against even their basic efforts to include (mention or empathize with) marginalized populations. They also shared five key forms of “backup” they had learned to marshal to keep such topics on the agenda. Building on scholarship positioning basic and deeper inclusion work as the unarguable task of schools, we explore how keeping the freedom to undertake even basic inclusion efforts requires teachers to preserve agency through assembling local backup -- supports from other people.

**Keywords:** inclusion, pushback, backup, teacher agency, diversity

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**Introduction**

In fall 2020, after a summer of nationwide protests for racial justice and a spring pandemic, many K12 educators began the year with explicit efforts to invite students of all identities to feel welcome and valued. Some ordered new books for classroom exploration; others created Zoom “backgrounds” or posted wall art to signal that all were welcome. And immediately, educators across the country reported local “pushback” against such efforts. In Texas, an educator was placed on probation after parents and community members complained that her Zoom background included a Black Lives Matter poster and rainbow flag; only after more than 23,000 parents,

students, and community members signed a public statement in her defense was she eventually reinstated (Fernández, 2020). In Oklahoma, as discussed in Author 1's Facebook group, a principal demanded that a teacher remove a "Your Life Matters" sign and posters of diverse faces painted by Shepard Fairey, posted on a physical wall. After debate, she was allowed to keep only the sign. And in Missouri, parents challenged a teacher for reading a book about the only Black astronaut aboard the Challenger Space Shuttle (Harris, 2021). The principal supported the teacher and decided to read the book to the entire school on Zoom.

In each case, educators were forced to navigate local "pushback" against their basic efforts to include--that is, simply mention, or teach empathetically about, the experiences of specific U.S. populations. In each case, teachers either marshalled or failed to marshal local *backup*--support to maintain their inclusion efforts. Their efforts magnified a basic dilemma in U.S. teaching. If critics try to censor a teacher's inclusion effort, who actually decides what gets discussed?

This paper shares K12 U.S. educators' efforts to navigate these core confusions by marshalling local support for inclusive teaching welcoming all communities. We explore how in a country with rising "pushback" against even basic inclusion efforts,<sup>1</sup> keeping the freedom to include students and topics in even basic ways requires teachers to preserve agency through assembling local *backup*. We came to define *backup* as local actors arranging supports to keep an empathetic discussion of human experience on the agenda.

We share data from a national pilot of #USvsHate ("us versus hate"), an educator- and student-led "anti-hate" messaging project co-designed by the authors and educators/youth in our region and across the country from 2017-2020. Piloted first in San Diego, #USvsHate was designed originally to address a "hate spike" era of emboldened bigotry and harassment on K12 campuses after the 2016 election (Rogers et al., 2017, 2019; Human Rights Campaign, 2017; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019). By publicly refusing "hate" and insisting on safe and welcoming classrooms and schools, #USvsHate also sought to provide an "onramp" to deeper investigation of longstanding experiences of bias, exclusion, and inequality in U.S. life (Pollock & Yoshisato, 2022). In its most basic form, #USvsHate invites students to insist publicly that "all people are equally valuable."

#USvsHate offers educators an open-ended invitation to design "anti-hate" learning experiences and encourages students to create "anti-hate" messages in any medium for their school communities and the broader public, through local sharing and a now-national biannual "challenge" or contest designed to amplify students' messages to a broader audience. Educators first teach "anti-hate" material of their own design, building off their existing curriculum or tapping lessons curated from national partner organizations; such lessons include lessons for Building an Inclusive School Community (e.g., issues of inclusion, identity, relationship-building, harassment, bullying, empathy, and "words that hurt") and lessons on Specific Forms of Hate, Bias, and Injustice (e.g., "racism," "xenophobia," "homophobia," "transphobia," "Islamophobia," "antisemitism," and "sexism."). #USvsHate 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." The project website invites students to make "anti-hate" messages that:

- communicate that people across lines of difference contribute to our communities, regions, and nation, are equally valuable, and deserve access to opportunity and well-being;
- explicitly address, explore, and refuse racism, xenophobia, homophobia, Islamophobia, antisemitism, sexism, or other forms of hate, bias and injustice in schools and society;
- celebrate our actual diversity and similarity, busting myths (challenging stereotypes) about any “type of” person too often misrepresented;
- ask people to treat each other kindly, fairly and respectfully, so schools stay safe for learning and society includes us all.

Educators and students share #USvsHate messages locally, then submit entries to a national “challenge” (contest); participating youth and teachers are invited to vote via Google Form on finalists. Winners are then posted on the usvshate.org project website, shared via @usvshate social media, and produced as posters and stickers sent back to participating classrooms to shape school climate. The website summarizes that “#USvsHate embraces inclusion and justice for all in our diverse schools and society,” and emphasizes that “Every school community can help spread the message that all community members are part of ‘US!’”

The project was an opportunity to explore, with educators, their basic and deeper inclusion work both in #USvsHate and throughout their careers (we have also explored #USvsHate with its youth participants; see, e.g., Pollock & Yoshisato, 2021). After piloting, expansion, and ongoing ethnographic study in San Diego (2017-2019; see Pollock & Yoshisato, 2021, 2022), #USvsHate was piloted nationally in 2019-20 through a challenge hosted by Teaching Tolerance (now Learning for Justice), the education arm of the Southern Poverty Law Center. We studied this national “scaleup” through interviews and focus groups with participating educators and students, again with the intention of feeding suggestions back into the project’s design (Barab, 2006; Dede, 2005). This paper focuses on 2019-20 national data.

While our overarching research on #USvsHate has explored more general questions (e.g., *How are educators and students in various contexts experiencing the dialogue and messaging efforts of #USvsHate, and what adjustments do they recommend? What can we learn about implementing such efforts in polarized contexts?*), here, we grapple publicly with a more specific inquiry: how did participating teachers react to efforts to stop their inclusion teaching? This paper taps stories participants told us about their careers long before #USvsHate, which clarified how “pushback” to inclusion teaching is nothing new -- even as educators need strategies for handling newly heightened versions of such pushback today, now more than ever (Pollock, Rogers et al., 2022; see footnote 1). This paper analyzes core “backup” strategies named by educators as successful for keeping inclusion on the agenda over their careers.

In interviews, educators routinely described prior careers of experiencing “pushback” from parents, colleagues, students, and community critics against extremely basic efforts to include (mention or discuss empathetically) marginalized populations in specific communities (an act we theorize elsewhere as “basic inclusion”; Authors, in preparation). Indeed, as we listened to teachers, we noted that many participating educators’ stories were actually about pushback against *extremely basic* initial inclusion efforts from earlier in their careers: teachers had simply argued

that a marginalized population existed, was equally valuable, mattered, should not be harmed, and deserved to be welcomed or learned about in school settings. Whether teachers were mentioning LGBTQ people's very existence or saying simply that "humanity is bigger than borders," teachers essentially were just making clear that a population existed and deserved human respect.

Teachers also shared how over their careers, they had learned to marshal local support proactively to continue such inclusion efforts in their classrooms and schools -- the act we here analyze as "backup." In our data analysis phase, we thus came to ask this paper's specified research question about teachers' inclusion efforts: *If critics tried to censor a teacher's inclusion effort, who actually decided what got discussed? We came to define pushback as the moments when local critics called for taking empathetic treatment of a community or its experiences off of the agenda in a classroom or school (e.g., saying that books featuring Black astronauts or mentioning LGBTQ families should not be read in school). We came to define backup as local actors arranging supports to keep an empathetic discussion of human experience on the agenda.*

Teachers described battles over inclusion essentially as battles among local people over whether a given topic of human experience would be discussed empathetically (or at all) at school. The situation required teachers to preserve their agency *to* pursue even basic inclusion through assembling supports from other people--proactively in case they got pushback, and reactively when they did.

While much research has made the case for both basic and deeper inclusion work (see Literature, below), less research has offered concrete, empirically-based suggestions for teachers encountering pushback against even basic inclusion efforts. We thus offer a taxonomy of educators' own strategies for marshalling local support for welcoming all communities. We explore five key forms of "backup" that teachers had learned to seek and arrange in order to persist in basic inclusion efforts.

We first briefly discuss related literature positioning both basic and deeper "inclusion" as a core responsibility of schools in a democratic and diverse society, then delve more deeply into literature that hints that teachers must develop their own agency to keep the freedom *to* include in a society where many find such basic inclusion threatening. Including and supporting all students is actually educators' legal responsibility, but teachers seem to keep the freedom *to* include populations in discussion and programming only if supporters and employers insist they can.

### **Prior Literature and Theoretical Frameworks**

Much education scholarship expects educators to teach for "inclusion" both basic and deep. Multicultural education (e.g., Nieto, 1999), anti-bias education (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020), and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Howard, 2010) call for affirming students' identities in schools (Cohn-Vargas & Steele, 2013) while also developing students' ability to critique hierarchies and "fight against the many isms and phobias that they encounter" (Milner, 2011, p 69). Teachers nationwide come across such methods as foundational tools for supporting youth success -- that is, as their job. In its invitation for students and school communities to "call for inclusion and opportunity for all 'types of people' across our society" and "reject any situation

or action that treats some ‘types of people’ as inherently more valuable than others,” (usvsbate.org/about), #USvsHate hopes to ignite such inclusion effort. Yet many participating educators described prior careers of encountering “pushback” when attempting to simply mention, empathetically, often-excluded communities as equally valid.

Indeed, scholarship describes a key murkiness for K12 teachers if local parents, community members, students, or colleagues “push back” against their efforts at inclusion: educators seem both free and not necessarily free to treat marginalized populations empathetically. While tenured university professors expect “academic freedom,” K12 teachers’ speech and pedagogical choices are not so clearly protected (Levinson & Fay, 2019; Uerling, 2000). Courts often privilege the power of school boards and administrators to exercise control over curriculum and instruction, following the principle that teachers speak for the state as employees when teaching (Patterson & Chandler, 2008). Teachers also are expected to teach to “standards” as interpreted by local leaders. Thus, K12 teachers’ decisions to explore specific topics in specific ways within their classrooms are highly dependent on the school system and community in which they teach. In particular, educators wading into issues deemed controversial by their systems often seem at the mercy of employers, who could deem issues “too political” and off limits to educators expected to remain publicly “neutral” (Hess & MacAvoy, 2014). Fearing critics (if leaders do not explicitly protect teachers’ work), many teachers in a nation ostensibly committed to “free speech” fear they are not to mention any controversial issue (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Today, lawyers are increasingly working with teachers to clarify their own speech rights (Thurgood Marshall Civil Rights Center, 2022).

At the same time, U.S. free speech law protects *students’* right to discuss their views and identities in school (Eidelman & Hinger, 2018). Current laws in specific states, such as California’s Education Code Section 51204.5, say explicitly that the historical “roles and contributions” of various marginalized groups “shall be included” in “instruction” (California Legislative Information, 2020). School climate research has insisted that activities that “promote social inclusion” support student success and should be core to educators’ work (Coulston & Smith, 2013; Cardillo, 2013; Way & Nelson, 2018). Further, scholarship on schools’ role in fostering inclusive democracy argues bluntly that even as educators invite debate and deliberation over divergent ideas, educators can and must assert the equal worth of human populations (Rogers, forthcoming). And finally, U.S. civil rights laws *expect* educators to protect students’ right to learn free from harassment or other discrimination (ACLU, 2020; Pollock, 2008). Thus, as explicit bigotry escalated across the nation’s campuses after the 2016 election and the Authors began designing #USvsHate in response, national organizations reminded educators that the basic work of welcoming all communities was simply educators’ job (SPLC, 2018).

As noted below, teachers’ basic efforts to “include” each played out in a unique ecological context, such that inclusion work made “off limits” in one community was “on limits” in another. In each community, that is, an educator had to navigate *toward* the ability to teach for inclusion in specific ways. So, to analyze the many stories of such navigation in the data shared below, we tapped scholarship on teacher agency and *ecological agency*.

Scholarship argues that teachers' actions are shaped by given environments with rewards and punishments (Priestley et al., 2015). More specifically, work on ecological agency suggests that teachers' ability to shape their daily work is forged in specific settings through "the interplay of individuals' efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors" (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137). Teachers' stories of handling resistance to their inclusion efforts typically shared how teachers navigated local ecologies and specific actors in them to be able to include specific populations, both proactively in case of pushback and reactively in response to it. As seen below, teachers leaned on resources beyond their localities (e.g., national organizations, state standards, laws) to "back up" and justify their inclusion work. But the most important factor was whether local *people* would "back up" the inclusion work critiqued.

Researchers call overall for "more contextualized treatment" of inclusion efforts, including "attention to larger context(s)" of hostility to inclusion (Poteat et al., p. 511-12). Yet researchers exploring pushback against inclusion efforts often call more generally for building alliances (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Junco, 2018), or offer hypothetical case studies (Levinson & Fay, 2019; Howell et al., 2019) or philosophical arguments (Bialystok, 2015). Our work, instead, seeks to support educators more concretely in navigating such "pushback." This paper thus attempts to contribute empirical examples of such *backup* work from across the country, at a moment when "pushback" increasingly threatens teachers' efforts at even basic inclusion (Pollock, Rogers et al., 2022). While some have used the term "pushback" to describe antiracist countermoves through which people of color counter harm (e.g., Ore, 2016), we define it as our teacher participants used it: to describe critics insisting that specific populations should not be included or validated, nor their experiences discussed. We focus here on how educators, as agents, created the local conditions for basic inclusion to occur -- what we came to call "backup."

We turn now to our methods and findings.

### Methods

In 2019-2020, during a year of national scale-up of #USvsHate, we invited teachers and students participating to comment on #USvsHate experiences via interviews, focus groups, support gatherings, and open-ended anonymous surveys that educators received when submitting entries to our national challenges or expressing interest on the usvshate.org website.

We contacted all who submitted to our contests and also contacted all educators we saw posting on the project on social media, inviting participants to share how educators and students were experiencing the project, supports they needed to persist in or improve the work, and how their efforts were received in their local contexts. In this year, 44 educators submitted student anti-hate messages to the #USvsHate national contest and reported almost 4000 students participating in #USvsHate at their schools. Through analyzing our public submission form, we determined that of the 44 submitting educators (almost all teachers, with two school leaders), 65% were from suburban areas, 20% from urban, 10% from rural, and 5% from a mixed area. The majority came from public schools, with a smaller percentage from charter and private schools. Of the teachers who submitted, 55% self-described their race as white, 7% as Black, 7% Latinx, 4% Asian, and

2% as Native American; 25% did not select a “race” (e.g., “Other” or “Prefer Not To Say”). 30% of submissions came from elementary grades, 35% from middle school, 25% from high school, and 10% from multi-grade schools (e.g., K-8; 6-12). Of the 44 submitting educators that we invited, we secured interviews with 27 via phone, Zoom video calls, and at support gatherings. Of those interviewed, 91% were female, 6% male, and one self-described as nonbinary. (We include such gender and race self-descriptors below when they will not make participants findable.) 25% taught English Language Arts, 25% multiple subjects, 30% integrated subjects (e.g., freshman seminar, school counseling, etc.), 7% art, 3% various STEM subjects, and 10% advising school clubs. As it happened, none of the teachers we interviewed were first-year teachers; experience ranged from several years to many.

We interviewed educators from the East, South, Midwest, and West, in suburban, urban, and rural communities. We share some location details to convey the diversity of ecosystems navigated. As described by those interviewed, settings ranged from “a low economic school with...around 80-85% free and reduced lunch” (Southern California), to a low-income neighborhood “almost like a little small town in the middle of [a city]” (Oklahoma), to a school for “at-risk” youth in “the hill country” of rural Texas with a majority “non-Hispanic Caucasian [sic]” demographic and also a “growing Hispanic population, [and] a very small African American population.” One teacher said her school in New Jersey had a “very diverse, multicultural ethnic background,” with a large and diverse “Asian population” and “very few low-income families.” Another teacher in Oklahoma said she taught at “an alternative school where we’re 100% free and reduced lunch” and a “10% white population.” A teacher east of San Diego taught at a high-poverty school with eight different home languages and “a lot” of “refugees from countries like Iraq or Syria or Afghanistan or the Republic of Congo.” An art teacher in St. Louis taught in two predominantly Black schools surrounded by factories and “abandoned buildings.” Another teacher from suburban New Jersey noted her community was “90% Hispanic,” including people from “South America, Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean.” A Black teacher from Iowa (the only non-white educator mentioned in this paragraph), described teaching at a predominantly white IB school where “there’s about 700 students, and I don’t know if even 100 would be minorities.”

Without prompting, teachers described working in a range of *ideological* contexts. Several described schools wholly committed to inclusion and diversity, particularly charter, private, or religious schools--such as a Waldorf school in Vermont devoted to “a pedagogy that recognizes humans as spiritual beings,” or an Illinois large city school an educator described as being “one of the few faith schools...rooted in Catholicism that actually actively celebrate and recognize the faith traditions of other students and families that are represented.” One teacher described their public school in Madison, WI, as a “super liberal place.” These educators described experiencing local ecosystems that felt explicitly committed to supporting inclusion work.

Others described participating in #USvsHate under very different ideological circumstances, such as “an incredibly conservative community, especially with LGBTQ” (Southern California) or “a very well off predominantly higher socioeconomic bracket,” with “more white/Asian groups” and “more conservative parents” (San Diego, CA). One teacher

described her “university town” as its “own diverse, pretty liberal bubble in this more conservative space” (Virginia), while another described doing the work in a “majority Caucasian [sic] school” in “a very, um [slight pause], evangelical area” (rural South), where parents would complain to administrators about any mention of LGBTQ issues and “many parents object to certain books that deal with race.” While we were particularly primed for stories of local “white” resistance to #USvsHate effort, a standard research finding re K12 “antiracist” efforts (Pollock & Matschiner, forthcoming), teachers also described more complex demographic dynamics undergirding local “objections” to inclusive teaching. A Southern California teacher, for example, described immigrant and refugee parents making both anti-Black and anti-Mexican comments on group discussion boards, and anxiously asking “are the gays coming?” regarding an LGBTQ guest speaker invited to the school. Each situation provided a specific context for #USvsHate’s inclusion efforts.

In interviews, which ranged from 30-60 minutes, we asked educators about instructional resources used in #USvsHate experiences, successful and difficult moments, and supports needed to discuss these issues at school. We asked questions like “How did you incorporate #USvsHate into your teaching or your school community?” and “How would you describe [students’, parents’, colleagues’, administrators’] reactions to #USvsHate?” We found that much of our data was metapragmatic (Silverstein, 1993), as teachers talked about their ability to talk: Teachers described a battle over communicating publicly and inside classrooms about the experiences of U.S. populations, often literally using the term “pushback” to describe how different local actors called key discussions unacceptable. Educators also often named topics that were particularly off-limits in their community, what we came to call “third rail topics,” as discussed below. We probed these stories for ethnographic detail when they arose in our interviews, even as we worked hard not to insert the literal term “pushback” ourselves (Mischler, 1991; Briggs, 1986).

We used discourse analysis techniques piloted in studies on race/diversity talk (e.g., Pollock, 2004, 2008, 2015) to analyze themes in our fieldnotes and interview transcripts (Charmaz, 2006). We first coded our data for moments when local critics argued that basic inclusion should *not* occur (what we and participants called “pushback”). We then began to notice both that teachers’ stories reached back into their prior careers, and that teachers’ stories described educators and others creating the local conditions for basic inclusion to occur (what we came to call “backup”). In our more focused coding and analysis (Lofland & Lofland, 1995), we then began to code both for versions of “pushback” and strategies for countering it that arose in participants’ responses and across individuals (Boyatzis, 1998), noting a variety of educators’ efforts to secure, from and with other local people, the ability to teach for inclusion locally--what we named “backup.” We discussed repeated versions of “pushback” and “backup” weekly with our project team, then organized backup examples into the five “buckets” below. As member checks (Richards, 2005), we increasingly asked interviewees about local reception of their inclusion work as we realized the prevalence of “pushback” stories. As we continued to see national examples of state-level legislation and even national organizations and politicians countering basic inclusive teaching (Pollock, Rogers et al., 2022; see Footnote 1), we decided to produce an ethnographically

based analysis of “pushback” experiences and taxonomy of “backup” strategies that teachers themselves articulated. Our findings section shares overarching patterns and then our more specific taxonomy of five “backup” forms.

### Findings

In interviews, some educators described experiencing “pushback” from critics about the most basic form of “inclusion”: including “identity” discussions in school. As one teacher from Chula Vista, CA, noted, “I think when we do important lessons like this that deal with social issues and identity, we are not going to please everyone.” Teachers using the term “pushback” also described local resistance to teaching *specific groups’* experiences (e.g., the existence of LGBTQ families) and to discussing overall topics like race or immigration. Educators also described critics’ resistance to specific *ways of* teaching a given subject, often hinging on how empathetically specific populations were discussed. In one San Diego school where the principal had herself once taught units on immigration history and refugees today, for example, the same principal agreed with a complaining parent that a teacher mentioning empathetically the struggles of today’s undocumented immigrants was “inappropriate.”

Educators told us that throughout their careers, such local “pushback” had come from parents particularly, as well as from administrators, colleagues, and students. One Midwestern teacher who described herself as Black shared how her principal had once critiqued her for adding discussion of racism to a lesson about “bullying”: he didn’t care about his students becoming “woke,” he’d said, just “on grade level.” Sometimes, it was students who pushed back on the inclusion of particular topics, citing their own religious beliefs or parents’ opinions. In Washington state, a teacher who identified as a woman of color recalled that a student had once opposed discussing LGBTQ topics because “my parents say that trans is bad and I shouldn’t learn about it.” One teacher said colleagues, too, historically had complained about feeling “forced” to teach about specific inclusion topics. Pushback from various actors in local ecosystems therefore focused both on teaching a given subject at all and on engaging in conversations empathetic to populations oppressed or marginalized. Teachers described both muting their own conversations about specific topics and learning to assemble support in order to talk.

As we analyzed these stories, we came to call “pushback” to specific topics (or to empathizing with specific groups) *third rail* pushback: in each ecological context, teachers noted that particular topics or populations were deemed “too controversial” to discuss. The phrase “third rail” refers originally to an electrified subway rail fatal to touch; in common usage, it denotes topics avoided by politicians fearing defeat. Each education community had its own third rail(s). Just within San Diego County, for example, a white teacher from an elementary charter school serving Latinx families said he typically felt comfortable discussing immigration but recently experienced “lines of parents” angry after he had read a book that included an image of a same-sex family on one page among other family images. In her predominantly white, upper-class San Diego community, a white elementary teacher said, educators had long “tread in really safe waters, where it’s less about skin color and religion, and we tend to be more about disabilities.” A woman

of color in a racially diverse charter elementary (with a mission committed to “diversity and equity”) said her administration and some “families” had resisted her prior efforts to teach lessons on gender identity to support a transgender student in her class; in contrast, she added, “I can teach about Black History Month and things.” One white K-8 teacher in a white/Latinx middle-class school deemed her students too “sheltered” to understand a “Being Mexican Isn’t a Crime” #USvsHate poster by a local student, even as she noted the community’s easy acceptance of a Gay-Straight Alliance club (“it’s just not stigmatized here”). And a white principal in a charter school focused on “social justice” (serving Latinx families near the border) said parents offered pushback only if teachers discussed *certain* marginalized identities. “You’ll talk about things like racism and feminism and you’ll hear nothing,” he said, but “[t]he second you start talking about homosexuality or LGBTQ it’s a firestorm.”

Different ecosystems made some third rails particularly hot during the years studied.<sup>2</sup> In San Diego communities in 2018-19 and 2019-20, some educators described particular pushback against empathetic discussions of immigrants because of the current administration’s overt targeting of undocumented immigrants and because of communities’ location relatively near the border. As a high school English/History teacher referencing the border wall and detention centers put it, “Immigration is a hot button issue, particularly in San Diego...I just try to not talk as much about it.” She described fearing “emails from the parents, and my Principal telling me what I can and cannot do in my classroom.” A high school humanities teacher from suburban Southern California noted that in her month-long unit about the national debate on immigration, she anticipated local critics might deem “us versus hate” as aligning with “a particular political agenda or... anti-Trump, or anti a particular policy.” As one middle school ELA teacher from a Philadelphia suburb put it, students repeated “things they were hearing on the news” and were “saying to other kids, ‘You know, we’re going to build a wall and you’re going to have to leave.’” The teacher added that for local teachers, though, expressing any take on immigration or immigrants felt like an off-limits “political opinion”: “you could get yourself into huge amounts of trouble if you express a political opinion related to some of those beliefs...and it’s hard. It’s hard to find where the line is.” Notably, she added that during the 2016 election, even basic efforts “to make sure that our kids of color have equal access to programming” had met local resistance.

Unexpectedly, in fall through early spring 2019-20, just before pandemic shutdowns and before the Black Lives Matter protests of summer 2020, our interviewees less commonly described race and racism as third rail topics prompting local “pushback,” other than racialized pushback in San Diego about supporting “undocumented immigrants” framed as non-white. One teacher in the rural South did note that “there were a lot of parents really upset” about a colleague’s recent teaching of the young adult novel *Dear Martin*, about a Black student shot by an off-duty White police officer: “Typically that has happened when it deals with books dealing with race,” she explained. Several teachers mentioned anti-Asian racism spiking in their communities during the COVID pandemic, but none of these teachers described “pushback” for discussing such realities with students. As researchers, we found ourselves wondering if our 2019-20 national sample of teachers (who were willing to be highlighted by a national organization they deeply respected,

Teaching Tolerance) was skewed toward more experienced teachers, perhaps leading to fewer stories of “pushback” when teachers discussed issues of race. We also emphasize now that this study took place before a national campaign targeted a caricatured “Critical Race Theory” that critics imagined in K12 schools in 2020-2021, after more educators nationwide attempted to explore issues of race and racism after the protests of summer 2020 (Pollock, Rogers et al., 2022).

But we also saw that teachers had learned from navigating a particular inclusion effort throughout their careers. In 2019-20, basic LGBTQ inclusion was the topic that teachers most described having experienced as a third rail throughout their professional lives. Educators noted that over their careers, students’ own demand to discuss LGBTQ communities and experiences empathetically had forced the issue onto the school agenda particularly often; local critics had pushed for outright censorship of LGBTQ experiences as well as policed any empathetic tone. And crucially, throughout our data, educators offered thoughts on how they and colleagues had come to strategically marshal backup to navigate local calls for censorship. Most had successfully participated in #USvsHate without problems, supporting students to voice their messages of inclusion.

We focus now on five forms of “backup” teachers had *learned* to marshal to enable basic inclusion efforts in their ecosystems. Educators either proactively lined up or reactively leaned on one or multiple forms of backup to keep inclusion on the agenda:

#### Five forms of backup

1. **Stealth backup:** educator makes a quiet, sometimes hidden effort to enable discussions of marginalized communities’ experiences.
2. **Subspace backup:** educator creates a subspace to afford an empathetic conversation about a community in a safe space, like a specific classroom or club.
3. **Student-led backup:** educator follows a student-led effort to teach about a community experience, then explains that students initiated and led the conversation there.
4. **School leader backup:** educator gets a powerful school player to vouch for the inclusion effort (e.g., a principal).
5. **System backup:** educator taps into systemic support (beyond the school) to protect inclusion effort (laws, standards, district-sponsored trainings, union, district staff).

#### ***Stealth backup***

One 7th grade ELA teacher in the rural South noted that colleagues anticipating critics attempting to censor teaching on specific topics, like “race,” had learned to sometimes openly preview with families what they planned to teach, then provide “opt out” options that let students skip texts. This had happened with a book discussing race and police brutality:

There’s a teacher at our school who was teaching the book *Dear Martin*, there were a lot of parents really upset with him teaching that book... so what a lot of teachers will do at my school before they assign a book, [is that] they’ll send a note out to parents letting them

know and they'll go ahead and give an opt-out. Now this teacher did that, 'here's another book if you're not as comfortable,' you know?

The effort kept inclusion on the agenda only partially, but it was perhaps more inclusive of content for most students than other teacher actions in her community. This teacher noted that teachers also had learned to "adapt" books to delete sections for everyone that might trigger local complaints. Her colleague had done that with *Dear Martin*:

He explained some of the themes in it and that there was stronger language in it, even though he went in and took the stronger language out, he adapted the book himself, there were a lot of parents who were still uncomfortable and so the kids read a different book that dealt with similar topics.

She noted further that locally, literature on characters who were "proudly LGBTQ" would particularly prompt parents to approach "our administration" with "complaints about books":

We have read literature that involves students that are either questioning or who are proudly LGBTQ. But, I still worry. And I also have to be very careful with how I present it in this community because we have parents that have often come up to classes and to our administration with complaints about books, with complaints about any type of topic that veers into that. So, that's been something that I've always been cognizant of because I'm from [state] and I feel like it's been that way since I was young.

In this Southern community, "upset" parents often succeeded in censoring books and "language" for specific children, even as educators managed to keep a community's lived experience on the agenda overall. So, educators who knew parents waited to critique discussions that even "veered into" third rail topics also sometimes made fully *stealth* efforts to include populations and support students' freedom to learn without potential critics knowing. This teacher described how a quiet partnership with the school's librarians was key to heading off parent "complaints": they determined which books would be "put out" in public and which instead would be shared more quietly from inside her classroom as a personally funded mini-library. "I also have to, I guess just be cognizant of where I'm at, with what I say," she said:

So our library, actually, at the school, will not put certain books out that they feel might garner some of those complaints. So what we'll do--the librarians and I kind of work together. I will go out and buy said book, and I will have it in my classroom so if there is a kid who is interested in that type of book, will get sent to my classroom and will be able to get that type of book. And I've had to pretty much tell a girl, you know "take this home, but don't show your mom," which probably isn't the best thing to say, but, she really wanted to read a book that she could connect with.

Of course, such stealth efforts left books about specific populations' lives read only by individuals. The "advance permission" efforts above left the "adapted" books read only in part; "opt out" efforts left books read only by some. Still, as agents in their communities, teachers quietly helped students read books and passages they "could connect with." Even as such efforts deleted overt discussions of topics, that is, teachers had learned to keep basic inclusion minimally on the agenda even in ecologies leaning toward outright censorship.

The instinct to proceed stealthily depended on teachers' individual reactions to local ecologies. In our San Diego pilot in 2018-19, one elementary teacher, a woman of color serving low-income families of color, had described her very different process of openly inviting parents into back-to-school-night dialogue to build "buy in" on her planned #USvsHate exploration of children's experiences of "hate" on school grounds. Another, a white teacher in a more "sheltered," mostly-white community, said she refused to "ask permission" from parents for basic inclusive teaching but actually called #USvsHate work "anti-hate messaging" or "welcome messaging" because parents might find the project title too "political." In our national sample of different ecosystems, we met teachers who had learned to pursue a combination of proactive family "permission" for describing community experiences, and strategies instead leaning quietly on less triggering language.

Teachers also had learned to shelter students from knowledge or experience *of* such controversies, by creating specific subspaces to enable foundationally inclusive dialogue.

### ***Subspace backup***

In one San Diego area elementary school, teachers who felt they had "built a huge sense of safety in [their] classrooms" described purposefully keeping students unaware of tensions brewing between the principal and a parent complaining about a child's poster saying it was "OK to love any gender." The teachers described continuing in their own classrooms, staying committed to a subspace where they sheltered students from the larger controversy. One teacher noted:

We never communicated to our class the roadblocks that we were facing with the principal or parents...not only did we just build a huge sense of safety in our classroom, we never brought back some of the challenges we were facing, so they continued to feel that sense of freedom to speak and freedom to be in our class. That didn't change.

In other ecosystems, teachers proactively created safe spaces outside classrooms for inclusive discussion of community experiences. At a Chicago Catholic school, a school leader advised a "Student of Color/Multicultural Experience" club as a space for students to have open, trusting conversations about experiences of race, gender, sexuality, and identity:

So I feel like it's brought out the best in so many of our students. It's also really allowed them to have very honest and real and raw conversations and reflections, because we're only meeting once a month, even just developing that sense of trust in the group.

In Kansas, a middle school librarian led a "diversity leadership club" that met outside of students' class time to learn about unconscious bias related to race, sexuality, and gender through field trips, dinner events, and small group discussions. After completing a training, club members taught lessons on these topics to peers during the school's flex time, taking inclusion efforts more directly into classrooms.

Teachers also indicated that sometimes key staff members were safe subspaces unto themselves by simply existing *as* themselves. As the educator from the Illinois religious school put it, a trans staff member "within our school community" was a "tremendous resource" for

schoolwide welcoming of students “that are considering, or questioning, or are in the LGBTQ community,” simply by broadcasting that “he's comfortable in himself with who he is.”

Educators who themselves shared identities marginalized in many ecosystems also shared how they proactively created subspaces welcoming students' discussion of often-marginalized experiences. One Wisconsin non-binary, queer teacher described publicly in a large national Facebook group how in a prior community where they had taught, administrators and families had celebrated only straight colleagues' engagements and weddings. In contrast, in the teacher's present school in a university town, being openly LGBTQ felt possible. Still, students requested safe subspaces for such discussion. The teacher noted in our interview how students had actively requested an LGBTQ group subspace affording basic dialogue about inclusion:

A couple of fifth graders came up to me and asked if we could have an LGBTQ group. I was like, “Oh, sure.” That's called a GSA and I'd be happy to have one.

The teacher described further how students led LGBTQ-focused dialogue in their subspace: So we meet once a week, um, for their recess time and just, they kind of come up with the agenda...They've done some institutes where they research a topic like Stonewall even or LGBTQ around the world. And then they come with information on a poster or a presentation, on Google slides or something and present to the group about that topic.

The students eventually made a video calling for LGBTQ+ and diversity-inclusive schools, which the teacher posted on the Facebook group with “likes” by many thousands. Thus, student requests to create a sub-space to discuss the topic in this teacher's “liberal” school had catalyzed both the teacher's agency in creating that space, and then amplification of the topic nationally.

Other educators described similarly following *student-led* efforts that enabled local teaching on a community experience. After students demanded a basic conversation, teachers could more comfortably have it.

### ***Student-led backup***

In our interviews of 27 teachers, seven teachers spontaneously mentioned students pressing to talk about LGBTQ issues or do #USvsHate projects around LGBTQ topics -- and the teachers noted how such student desires made these basic conversations more possible where they worked. A white high school teacher in New Jersey expressed happiness that a lot of her students voluntarily did projects on LGBTQ+ issues for the #USvsHate contest, as their choices allowed her to have related discussions in class. She felt this was especially important to balance out complaints from some students from local “religious” and “very conservative” families. Despite “[recognizing] that there's prejudice and discrimination in their own community,” she noted, such students had in her experience contested even basic LGBTQ inclusion efforts, declaring “well, my religion tells me that it's wrong.” Yet with local student peers pushing the issue, classroom conversations then often seemed to engage such students who had initially resisted third rail topics. The teacher was increasingly hopeful about inclusion efforts in her community: “I see them more and more comfortable talking about those issues like every single year.”

Many teachers noted that local student comfort with a given third rail topic made it infinitely easier to discuss in their schools. A teacher in a “progressive leaning” Pennsylvania suburb noted that while “middle school kids are unkind in the way they speak to each other in general,” students raising the topic of LGBTQ experience themselves enabled peer dialogue on the subject where she worked. She noted being impressed that her students were so “compassionate and open-minded,” not “bat[ting] an eyelash” as a student described transitioning from a “she” to a “he.” The Kansas librarian noted seeing “a lot more students also talking about LGBTQ+,” a form of backup she framed as enabling inclusion efforts in her school community.

Teachers saw student comfort with a “third rail” issue often exceed adults’, leading adults to “push themselves” into new conversations in the local environment. A Washington teacher noted that her student teacher, anxious about teaching LGBTQ topics in #USvsHate, gained comfort as students led the discussion. “There were quite a few students who were like, ‘Oh yeah, well I identify as trans,’ or [some] identify as pansexual... It was funny cause they were more comfortable with that kind of direct topic”:

I saw a lot of interest in transgender issues and transphobia. I feel like more and more, every year, I have students identify as trans at a younger and younger age. Um, and they are feeling more comfortable sharing that with the class, sharing that with teachers, which has pushed us to really push ourselves as a staff. We've been looking at how we can make these students comfortable.

As teachers followed the lead of students who were “more comfortable” than themselves in basic conversations about previously third rail topics, teachers started seeking new “training” and professional development resources as additional backup for local work:

We started some training, or we started looking into the resources that GLSEN makes [Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network]. We [also] hope to use this resource, I think it’s called Safe Space Kit, soon. And we were actually looking at doing the professional development on it before, you know, COVID.

Students demanding a community’s experience be discussed in this ecosystem thus supported not just one teacher’s agency in teaching the topic, but development of more backup schoolwide.

Other educators went to school leaders directly to proactively seek support for inclusion efforts -- particularly, their principals.

### ***School leader backup***

Teachers most often approached school leaders for backup for basic inclusion, according to our interviews. Some teachers noted that principals actually “supported” at times by essentially ignoring teachers’ efforts, or at least never intervening in them. As the Wisconsin teacher put it, “My principal supports me so much...he trusted me to like do it on my own.” Yet many educators spoke of learning to proactively seek support in case local critics complained. For example, “Jane,” a white elementary teacher east of San Diego, noted that prior to a lesson on “family diversity” (acknowledging the existence of diverse family configurations, including LGBTQ parents), “I

actually always made sure I had the support of the administration. I say, hey, I'm going to do this lesson about family diversity and this is what it looks like”:

I came to [the principal] and I said, this is what I am doing, and I just wanted to make sure in case parents came to you that you knew that this is what I've done and this is the conversation. I also wanted to make sure I had your blessing. She said, “you know what? That's great. I'm glad you're doing that. Of course you have my support.”

Teachers noted that local principals “supporting” specific inclusive “conversations” as allies often encouraged teachers to take next steps in inclusive teaching. Jane’s principal, for example, had shared #USvsHate with her proactively.

School leader support felt particularly necessary for basic inclusion in some ecosystems. Even as Jane described having support from her administrator, she described experiencing consistent pushback from parents on “sexual orientation conversations” since she’d moved from the Bay Area to her more “conservative” community in San Diego County. Jane said she did not initially feel comfortable being open at school about being gay herself; her plan thus was stealth at first, “to make all the families love me and to get to know me within the district and then be more open about it.” Still, her plan did not protect her from painful parent pushback against simply valuing LGBTQ people’s existence. In reaction to a new sex education program, a parent asked, “Are the gays coming? Do I need to pull my kids out of school today?” Jane reflected:

I walked into the staff room totally shaking and crying because...I know this parent knows me as a teacher and loved me as a teacher and respects me as a teacher. But it just made realize, like she has no idea that I’m gay. And it just felt really hurtful.

Warning her principal about specific lessons also did not fully protect Jane from more aggressive parent pushback. After one “family diversity” lesson, parents contacted Jane saying, “my kids said that you said it’s okay to be gay. And I’m wondering why you’re saying this to them. We don’t say that’s okay.” One parent even searched for Jane online and discovered from social media that she was gay, then went to Jane’s principal saying Jane was “kissing a woman in front of the children” and “telling the kids that when they grow up, they have to be gay.” Prepped to offer backup, the principal supported Jane by checking in with her before responding to the parents. Still, the parents contacted the school district and had their child removed from Jane’s class, essentially going “above” the school-level backup Jane had arranged. Jane’s backup effort allowed the issue to stay on the agenda for her other students.

Other educators said their school leaders offered backup through publicly stating their commitment to basic inclusion work. The Kansas librarian noted that her principal needed little goading to back her up, as she was “very committed to concepts of diversity,” let “[the diversity group] meet once a month” (“[giving them] a leg up”), and supported more extended inclusion efforts when asked:

When we're working on things, if I need more than once a month, I can go in and say I really need more time, and she'll just say, take it. We're a strong academic school, but she really believes in the social emotional development and is very committed to that.

Educators also noted the importance of convincing peer colleagues in their schools to back them up in basic inclusion efforts. One white high school English teacher from Oklahoma described her proactive efforts to engage other teachers in #USvsHate by visiting “professional learning communities.” Inviting colleagues’ participation in the project created “overlapping” efforts that would then further protect efforts to let students “express” their anti-hate ideas:

We have professional learning communities here, so I was able to go and visit their [art] professional learning community and present what we were doing, and how some students may want to express it this way. And how did they feel, what did they think about what I was doing? That turned into them volunteering to be a part of it and to help facilitate it. I think one of them was like, “I need to present this next semester myself. That's something we can just do on our own.” I was like, “that's brilliant. Let me know when you need to do it and we can co-do it. I can do it at the same time you're doing it, so any overlapping kids can hear it twice and really delve in and expand our conversation.”

“Overlapping” efforts were particularly powerful backup: teachers pursued inclusion efforts collaboratively. To seek such “community” support for basic inclusion work, teachers also described leaning on system supports beyond their individual schools.

### **System backup**

Some teachers noted how they privately readied arguments that broader district initiatives justified their basic inclusion lessons, for example by arguing that examining implicit bias with students fit district goals for “social emotional learning” (as did the Kansas librarian regarding her diversity club). The librarian spoke of how work “at the district level” laid a foundation for her school’s teaching on basic experiences of sexuality and gender:

We have modules on any diversity issue that we can think of, from what is the modern family to issues of equity to transgender, specifically because we've had a lot of transgender teens making the transition like transitioning. And we try to look at possible needs. So we've always done a lot of LGBTQ work, but we made a specific module just about things, like how to approach school bathrooms and language people need to use. And [we're] even getting into things -- [like] that it does not matter what you think about the student, it is how the student desires to be identified. And that's not your decision to make. And so we do a lot of that at the district level.

Educators also noted that unions provided backup when teachers wanted to include discussion of specific experiences. For example, the Washington teacher said her “role in union leadership” as well as her knowledge of “district curriculum” gave her confidence in the possibilities for her lessons, such as how to engage in conversations about stereotypes, bullying, and empathy when teaching a district-approved novel, *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*:

So, I can point to that and say...“What I'm doing is the district curriculum. The [#USvsHate] project, that's just my academic freedom.” ... And when I say, ‘academic freedom,’ that's specifically in our contracts, in our bargaining agreement. And so, because

I do all the union stuff, I know that. But if someone weren't involved with the union, they probably wouldn't be able to push down like that.

An arts and humanities teacher from Philadelphia pointed to a “safety in numbers” approach to marshalling union backup for basic inclusion efforts:

Any teacher who experiences [pushback] should talk to their union rep, and get the support of other teachers so they're not alone. I suppose there's always a risk in speaking up, but the union should help mitigate this risk. In a private conversation, a good union rep should also be able to help the teacher assess the level of risk and how to guard against any possibilities of non-renewal. And again, there's always safety in numbers!

A Latina “veteran principal of 17 years” with experience on two coasts offered similar advice in a public Facebook group regarding the controversy over the “Your Life Matters” wall sign in Oklahoma (discussed in our introduction). She emphasized factoring in one's ecological context when seeking backup for posting such basic support for students, but also leaning ultimately on “your union”: “How you handle it depends on your context, your number of years in the district and community, your union, etc.”

Outside organizations and their local trainers also provided backup for basic inclusion work. The Wisconsin teacher noted that an outside organization, Welcoming Schools (WS), partnered with both the district and the school to provide lessons and “training” on welcoming LGBTQ people and students alongside all populations in schools. “I brought it up to my school, everybody was supportive and then we now have the training annually,” the teacher explained. Such shared “training” involving “everybody” in a school was particularly powerful systemic backup: students could go from one class to the next with shared vocabulary and understanding, such that the inclusion responsibility did not fall solely on this particular teacher and students received a unified basic message across classrooms. Referring to how every teacher in the school did a WS lesson on accepting students' preferred gender pronouns at the beginning of the year, the teacher summed up, “Everybody's on board with that.” The teacher further explained that “paid” district backup made this possible: “We have an LGBTQ lead for the district, which is really helpful. And the Welcoming Schools lead, so they are paid as district people to help.”

Other educators pointed to state-level policy (at times referred to as “standards”) outlining their “rights” and freedom to pursue basic inclusion efforts. As one white male principal said of California's Ed Code, these laws afforded backup for teaching about LGBTQ people's experiences and contributions alongside other groups':

I think being well versed in what the standards actually say in terms of LGBTQ is really good for teachers. I don't want to cause rebellion, but you have your rights as a teacher. Knowing that is really important.

At a small support gathering for the project, this principal told local teachers experiencing pushback about LGBTQ positive messaging (in another school) that California law itself could have been cited to protect these basic inclusion messages. The principal pointed the teachers to language in the “California Ed Code” *requiring* that “instruction in the social sciences” include diverse communities' contributions, including “lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

Americans” (California Legislative Information, 2020). Recounting the discussion later in his own 1-1 interview, this principal noted that “Running into these issues of not being able to put up a sentence that has to do with gender or gender roles or LGBTQ?!...that’s where I would tell the teachers they should be more well versed in Ed Code.” Because “at the end of the day,” he said, “we are bound by law to present some of these topics.”

Teachers also described explicitly referencing state and national “standards” to justify their basic inclusion work when challenged. As a teacher from the South summed up, “if you can pull it back to standards then, you know, you kind of mute whatever argument [as] irrelevant.” A white elementary teacher from the San Diego area described being ready to cite Common Core “standards” to “back up” efforts like #USvsHate and calm a worried principal if needed:

When you’re trying to say why you’re teaching something, a lot of times you have to say 'Oh, well, Principal, I’m teaching this and it is standard ELA blah-bitty-blah.' Because they’re going to ask you, '...why are you using academic time to do this?' 'Oh, well I’m supporting the so-and-so standards of reading and listening. . .you have to make sure that you can back it up."

The teacher from the South actually urged even more emphasis of “standards” on the #USvsHate project website, to “[have it] readily available for anybody that does have to defend themselves.” After a critic attacked her on Twitter for a petition her students sent to state legislators (about a policy that would affect them if passed), an organization of middle school educators had mobilized to clarify publicly how her work aligned with state standards (and “social justice standards” created by Teaching Tolerance), plus students’ First Amendment rights:

They got together a response for me, basically, that outlined all of the standards I’m covering and all of the things that middle school teachers want to see. They also linked the Teaching Tolerance standards to that response.

Other educators spoke of printing *Teaching Tolerance* magazine articles to stealthily place in colleagues’ mailboxes as backup for initial inclusion conversations. Educators also noted how their participation in such national organizations’ trainings could scale to more systemic local backup. For example, one San Diego K-8 school had funded a small group of teachers and students to participate in the Anti-Defamation League’s “No Place for Hate” regional workshops. Peer leaders then led lessons and invited #USvsHate messaging from “the whole school”:

We decided to have the kids who did the No Place for Hate training help us with the #USvsHate lessons and teach all the other students because we wanted the whole school to be involved. So we actually had the No Place for Hate students go into other classrooms and give almost like a little mini lesson and then ask the kids to do the posters for the contest and that went really well.

The combination of a local “training,” student “excitement,” and then students’ “anti-hate” messages themselves had helped convince parents to back up this initial inclusion effort financially:

The PTA [Parent-Teacher Association] actually paid for the training for the No Place For Hate. So, I know they were really excited about that. And then, once we did the #USvsHate

lessons, parents were also excited about that. And I reached out to parents, you know, who had kids that submitted some really nice posters and stuff, and the parents were really excited about it and the kids were excited about it, too. They thought it was a really good project and good things that they were learning. So they were all in for it, too.

In this case, a cascade of “excitement” led to systemic backup for basic inclusion efforts. Such excitement also could move district leaders to take basic steps. A teacher from the Northwest relayed that #USvsHate’s “national” amplification of her student’s winning message (calling for LGBTQ+ inclusion among other topics) catalyzed the district to begin to support LGBTQ inclusion events. We learned later that the superintendent had reproduced the message for his own office wall as a signal of support for basic inclusion.

District leaders could also offer system-wide backup directly from above. In one district in Southern California, leaders told us they were planning on training all principals to be ready to respond to parent critiques of any inclusion efforts, as principals had previously experienced vociferous homophobic pushback related to a basic health curriculum offering “sex ed.” A teacher said she felt the superintendent “spearheaded” and strongly “modeled” a commitment to foundational inclusion work “from top down” because she personally was “more aware of what prejudices or things people might experience”:

[I] think she’s lesbian herself and I think she’s bringing a new perspective that they didn’t have before, because she’s coming at it “I’ve had this prejudice.”...I think that’s why it’s coming from top down, because she’s modeling it.

Across #USvsHate in 2019-20, then, participating teachers shared stories of learning to wield a combination of these five forms of backup to keep basic inclusion efforts on the agenda locally. Each was a story of getting some key local supporters -- parents, students, the librarian, the principal, an organization, the superintendent -- to help keep empathetic treatment of a population’s experience on the agenda even if some local critics stood opposed. In discussing how “pushback” had been neutralized, many educators referred to a communication sequence in which a type of actor in a school or broader community disagreed about teachers’ discussion of some community and then went to some other actor to complain about it. As in the game “rock/paper/scissors,” an actor ready to provide backup could trump other actors’ critique and insist on respecting and empathetically recognizing a marginalized population.

In just a few situations we learned of, however, the reverse occurred: Local pushback, unsuccessfully countered, resulted in censorship triumphing over basic inclusive teaching (Authors, in preparation). In both cases, a single local parent cowed a school leader who chose *not* to provide backup for basic inclusion efforts. And in both cases, as no local actor backed up teachers’ freedom to include, young voices emphasizing basic “humanity” and “feeling OK about yourself and your identity” were physically ripped from school walls.

### Discussion

Pushback by local critics in the cases described throughout this article was an effort to restrict and censor both teaching empathetic to specific populations, and students’ own desires to learn and

speak. Just some critics insisted explicitly that messages be removed altogether from books or walls (the type of pushback to “ban” increasingly heard in 2020-2021 and beyond; Pollock, Rogers et al., 2022). Other pushback asked to temper basic inclusive teaching, like a student saying “I’m uncomfortable,” a parent complaining about *specific* language in a book, or a parent complaining that a teacher was saying “it was *OK* to be gay.” In the end, though, all pushback demanded censorship in some form – that a “third rail” topic or marginalized population not be discussed empathetically or at all.

Still, most teachers we met in #USvsHate had *learned to keep* the freedom to include, through accumulated experience with getting key local actors to allow it. Educators leveraged laws, organizations, standards, unions, and most importantly, perhaps, *local relationships: other people* in each local context who determined whether inclusion effort was possible or “too risky to enact” (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 7). Those successfully marshalling backup got to continue basic inclusion work. Others’ experiences of censorship made plain a fraught reality: teachers can include all only if local supporters say they can.

We conclude that educators need to *know* their agency to keep inclusion on the agenda in their local context. Stated bluntly, whether a teacher could keep a basic topic of inclusion explored in their ecological context depended on whether educators could get somebody local to agree that empathizing with a group of people was an acceptable part of their work. Some ecosystems afforded public celebration of inclusion validated by system leaders; in others, teachers proceeded in stealth or in subspaces. Often, key actors, particularly school leaders, made or broke inclusion efforts by standing up or not standing up to critics demanding censorship.

Priestley et al. (2015) argue that “agency” is something a teacher “achieves” through building “capacity” in specific ecological contexts (pp. 3-4). #USvsHate teachers’ past experiences of navigating pushback had indeed built teachers’ skills in enabling inclusion effort. In their current ecologies, teachers assembled “backup” from key local supporters who supported their work proactively or through trusting allowance. Some teachers proactively arranged parent permission for basic inclusion efforts and sponsorship from influential school leaders. Other teachers proactively informed administrators about planned teaching efforts until administrators “trusted” them and “left them alone.” Still other teachers sought backup outside their schools, from district initiatives, teacher organizations, PTAs, unions, or local actors who could clue them in to state or national standards.

Crucially, teachers also leaned particularly on often-underestimated powerful actors: *students* demanding the freedom to include. The power of students--whose First Amendment rights are less questioned--to move systems toward both basic and deeper inclusion is one focus of our next research. Emphasizing such student voice as well as supportive parent and community voice is also increasingly a focus of national organizations, as caricature-fueled pushback against race- and diversity-related teaching has spawned both “educational gag orders” in the form of partisan state legislation (PEN America, 2021), and a newly inflamed context of hostility toward such teaching in many localities nationwide (Pollock, Rogers et al., 2022).

Other forms of backup currently prioritized by advocates of inclusion were not mentioned as much by 2019-2020 #USvsHate teachers, who spoke to us before an explosion of coordinated pushback targeted K12 work on diversity and race in 2020-2021 (Pollock, Rogers et al., 2022). The National Education Association (NEA) now provides a model resolution to present to school boards for consideration, which “contains a commitment to affirming inclusion of all students” (National Education Association, 2021); such orgs also now seek to strengthen system backup through promoting participation in district level school board elections. As some state politicians propose and pass laws seeking explicitly to restrict and ban many discussions of race, gender, inequality, and inclusion in schools (PEN America, 2021), and as some local critics seek to muscle districts into passing similarly restrictive local policies (Pollock, Rogers et al., 2022), K12 educators are also learning to seek supports from local community organizations and to lift their own voices more collectively to express how teaching to include and value all populations fits longstanding educator responsibilities in a democracy. Other educators are learning to lean even more on organized student backup, as students themselves join organized actions to stand up for inclusive and accurate education at their school boards and in local press (Gibbs, 2021; Miller, 2021; Apodaca, 2021). Such efforts -- and intergenerational efforts involving local parents supportive of inclusion efforts, as well -- will likely increasingly be essential for sustaining both school- and district-level “DEI” (diversity, equity, and inclusion) efforts going forward. And of course, building educator capacity for doing such basic inclusion teaching well (and handling potential local pushback to it) is also increasingly acknowledged as essential: researchers call for proactively equipping teachers in pedagogies for discussing locally controversial issues (“risk mitigation techniques”: Pace, 2021) and urge education leaders to more proactively “back up” inclusion teaching (Pollock, Rogers et al, 2022).

In most of the cases discussed here, “backup” was provided by others sharing *local* ecosystems. In one case, however, social media brought in backup from larger networks of non-local supporters, such as the Southern teacher protected from a Twitter critic by an organization she belonged to. The stories with which we started this paper also point to a dynamic of national “social media backup” as a necessary focus for next research. This form of backup may become crucial as broad state laws target teachers in specific states. But in the data reported here, most often local actors providing backup still proved the final determinant.

We note too that not *all* teachers we met in #USvsHate described doing preparatory backup work to avoid pushback. Multiple teachers told us they “proceeded until apprehended,” as one put it. Indeed, in examples throughout our data, educators self-assuredly taught for both basic and deeper inclusion until somebody complained. Yet when pushback loomed, successful “backup” required some local actor insisting that a teacher’s inclusion effort was acceptable.

Crucially, all such stories demonstrate that potentially supportive actors in local ecosystems need support themselves. In particular, *school leaders* needed to know they had the support of districts, laws, “standards,” and colleagues (Pollock, Rogers et al, 2022). Teachers’ stories showed *teachers*, too, could support colleagues’ inclusion efforts by joining work and sharing backup strategies--and that *students*, too, could put issues on the local agenda and support

teachers to go further. The role of *parents* to support educators through challenges from other parents also requires far more attention. The stories here indicate that all such stakeholders could perhaps be buoyed in both basic and deeper inclusion efforts by remembering that inclusion stays on the agenda *if local people insist it does*.

### Conclusion

We conclude that teachers cannot sustain the basic freedom to include alone. Others in shared ecosystems must back up that freedom, including school/system leaders. We found five ways that educators worked to assemble backup to keep basic inclusion topics on the agenda and to teach specific groups' experiences empathetically.

Educators we met in #USvsHate made clear that for years, actors in their schools and broader communities (sometimes, even vocal individuals) had attempted to keep specific "third rail" human experiences off the agenda entirely. And for years, accordingly, educators had worked to secure backup strategically to teach such topics as a basic educator responsibility. From *stealth* efforts to subtly include populations to creating *subspaces* for safe dialogue, and by leaning on *student-led* demands to validate inclusive teaching, educators attempted to support students' rights to discuss real human experiences. Educators also got key *school leaders* to approve their efforts and tapped *system* supports as backup, hooking their efforts to laws, standards, or district-wide training. Notably, teachers who found particular ecosystems too constraining to their agency also described transferring to ecosystems where they could discuss third rail topics more comfortably- or at all.

Marshalling backup included seeking supports reactively when pushback occurred, and arranging supports preventatively. Each experience with pushback further equipped teachers to navigate their local ecosystem of complaints and power struggles. As next students "went home to tell" parents what teachers had "talked about" or parents "marched into" principals' offices to complain about it, teachers were more ready to come through such moments with both curriculum and careers intact.

U.S. teachers seem only as "free to include" as local supporters say they are. Depending on their ecological contexts, teachers *are* at risk of employers deciding that a topic of human experience "cannot" be discussed, or discussed in a particular way; teachers *are* at risk of critics starting a wave of "pushback" that might make an employer censor a topic. Each instance of local censorship deletes an opportunity for *students* to learn. Thus, educators at all levels in systems remain in a position of continually marshalling ongoing local support against censorship, and constantly shouldering the responsibility of keeping inclusion efforts and the basic experiences of U.S. populations on the agenda. While teachers can accomplish a lot in subspaces or stealthily, no teacher can be an island unto themselves: educators together with supporters keep the freedom to include. Educators' stories demonstrate, however, that marshalling such support is possible. We have shared teachers' tales of arranging "backup" to handle "pushback" to help other educators weather those pressures.

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup>. Over the 2020-2021 school year *after* this article's data were gathered (2019-2020), as we discuss in Pollock, Rogers, et al. (2022), "CRT" ["Critical Race Theory"] would become a caricatured catchall term powerful opponents used to inflame, foment, and nationally scale such localized opposition to inclusion effort. In what we call a "conflict campaign," a media-fueled, often deeply partisanized effort to "ban 'CRT'" was incited and fueled locally by powerful opponents ranging from national and state politicians to conservative media and conservative organizations, inflaming newly organized anti-"CRT" parents. Targets have included state law (with literal "bans" passed to restrict teaching and learning about race and diversity; PEN, 2021) and district policy, in addition to educators themselves. In our "Conflict Campaign" report (2022), we note that the fate of inclusion efforts going forward *still* lies with local education leaders and requires local-level backup from local people. Here, then, we explore "pushback" and "backup" efforts at the school level, of the kind predating the 2020-21 anti "CRT" conflict campaign. We believe our forms of "backup" continue to hold.

<sup>2</sup>. We note that in 2020-2021, after this 2019-2020 study period ended, "CRT" became a caricatured catch-all term opponents used to try to restrict teaching on a wide swath of topics related to race, gender, sexuality, and diversity (Pollock, Rogers et al., 2022). In a sense, "CRT" became a field-wide concocted "third rail" covering many localized third rail topics.

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