

## **Can we create a school culture of belonging without civil society?**

Our seniors are reporting that political turmoil and confusing information have made it a challenge to be a high school student over the last four years. It's difficult for them to come into an understanding of their world at a time when highly visible leaders traffic in falsehoods and discrimination.

Listening here at school to varied perspectives is essential for growth and has tremendous value in learning the job and life skills our young people need.

### **How we manage class discussions**

Within our classrooms, we know that to listen without debate or persuasion can do harm if we do not set clear guidelines. We must have community agreements that we will talk openly about difficult topics, hear from varied perspectives, and use only verifiable facts. We do that in part by setting guidelines and group agreements.

### **Our students need help outside school**

To help our students navigate the world we occupy, we must set limits outside the classroom and outside the school as well:

- We need a civil society that values free speech and will intervene to help our children and young adults learn to use conversation to educate themselves and shape their own perspectives.
- We must interrupt and correct false information. And teach students how to weigh the truthfulness of information they come across.

- We must interrupt and call out discriminatory speech or behavior as unacceptable in our spaces.

The events of this week were founded in both misinformation and a belief that one group can infringe on the rights of others—their rights to enjoy the dignity and respect of civil society.

### **The balance between free speech and civility**

Our nation's founders included free speech as a protection for individuals who disagree with government policies. Since then, we have developed some limitations. For example, we cannot yell "FIRE" in a crowded theater and create a panic.

Similarly, inciting others with false and defamatory statements cannot continue if we are to live, learn, and work together.

### **The connection between school culture and civil society**

To create a culture of belonging at school, we must begin with a civil society where everyone deserves dignity and respect.

I can make rules, but humans break rules. They ignore speed limits, cheat on taxes, drink when and where that they know it's wrong, etc. Humans are much **more likely to act in accordance with their values**.

If you can help me to teach students the values of using confirmed and valid information and showing everyone respect and treating them with dignity, I can use those values to help shape our culture here at school.

## **We can only get there by working together**

This is perhaps the most important place where school and family must partner. Only together can we succeed in creating a community that is safe and kind to everyone.

I believe that taking a stand on that with our students is incredibly important.

### **Helpful Resources**

Here are **three resources that may help you in conversations** about clarifying facts and sharing them in difficult conversations.

- Evaluating Sources: [https://newslit.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/How-to-know-what-to-trust-DIGITAL\\_092320.pdf](https://newslit.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/How-to-know-what-to-trust-DIGITAL_092320.pdf)
- Fact checking: <https://www.snopes.com/news/2021/01/06/liveblog-jan-6-capitol-riots/>
- Brave Spaces <https://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/moving-from-safe-classrooms-to-brave-classrooms>