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# ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

## What can schools say about current hot-button issues?

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Schools are the heart of the community. That does not change in times of societal angst and polarization. Issues in the community also affect our schools.

Confronting the myriad of social issues — racism, the role of law enforcement, public health, and many more — can be worrisome, even scary. School districts serve the community by embracing these difficult conversations instead of evading them.

As a school communicator, you may be called upon to help lead those conversations, to provide guidance for those who do, and certainly to handle these topics appropriately in your own work.

Tactfully handling hot-button issues is not easy, although some folks seem to have an innate ability to do so. But these are skills all of us can develop. Reams have been written about how to effectively and respectfully engage communities in such discussions. I'm currently reading Glenn E. Singleton's "Courageous Conversations about Race," and there are many other excellent resources.

This essay is not a substitute for those in-depth studies, but I hope it will spur ideas on your part.

### Know where you are

Schools constitute a laboratory of civic engagement — teaching and illustrating how to engage in constructive dialogue to students, staff, and the community. It would be irresponsible for schools to teach about historic conflicts but ignore the conflicts of today. Such discussions bring curriculum to life, develop critical thinking skills, and create the foundation for generations of civic dialogue.

Disagreement is not bad, so long as it is rational and respectful. In fact, disagreement indicates that people are engaged. A first step is to recognize that we can welcome reasoned disagreement instead of seeking to avoid it. Still, it will be important to understand how your district, your office, and you personally, handle controversial issues. There likely are written policies; there probably are unwritten expectations as well.

You are blessed if you and your district have solid experience and credible expertise in such discussions. If not, it is better to take incremental steps than to do nothing. An attitude of "we don't talk about that" benefits no one. The conversations are going on whether we acknowledge them or not, and ignorance is not bliss.

*(Over)*

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## **Recognize the goal**

The goal of these conversations, whether one-on-one or via social media or in face-to-face meetings, is to find common ground and build mutual understanding, not to decide who is right.

Changing others' minds is impossible. That is up to them. But thoughtful discussions can fertilize the ground so people are receptive to contrasting ideas, information, and interpretation.

In line with that, we need to recognize our own beliefs and biases, becoming aware of how they influence our interactions. Such self-awareness will help guard against our expectations for others to be like us, think like us, and do like us. That personal awareness also nurtures our desire to continue growing intellectually, emotionally, and socially. Lifelong learning applies not only to academic subjects but also to personal growth.

So invest in yourself. Educate yourself and expand your knowledge about the topic, no matter how much you think you know. Talk to colleagues and experts who have lived experience or are knowledgeable in other ways. Peruse social media to get a sense of community feelings. Read, listen to, and watch a cross-section of traditional news media and publishers.

Revitalize your daily routine. Visit — in-person or virtually — neighborhoods, businesses, religious institutions, organizations, and schools that you don't typically frequent. Expand your circle of coffee partners or lunch dates to include people whose backgrounds, situations, and beliefs contrast with your own.

All these interactions add to your skills and knowledge, while making each day a lot more interesting.

## **Pay attention to relevance**

In dealing with difficult issues, things will go smoother if you develop a sense of timing. Some emails, phone calls or other interactions call for an immediate response. Others do not. In either case, take time to think through your response beforehand; investing an extra minute, or several, could save you from future angst or misunderstandings.

In the same vein, some events will need a quick response to inform the public and to counter any disruptive or misleading statements on social media. Be prepared in your head, and in district protocols, for what you will need to address and when.

## **Construct the conversation**

Resources abound to learn how to conduct respectful conversations. Though many techniques sound simple and obvious, they require forethought and practice:

- Be respectful and be a positive example.
- Validate people's views but do not tolerate vulgar, abusive or demeaning comments.
- Listen without interrupting, listening closely to understand the other's perspective instead of focusing on your response.
- Silence is OK, allowing yourself or others time to think. Start with, "Give me a moment to think about that." Or if you've asked a question and expect an answer, your watchful silence likely will lead others to speak.
- Group discussions operate best with mutually accepted ground rules, including focusing on the idea and not the individual

- Avoid leading questions, such as, “Don’t you think ...?”
- Consider the unexpected and prepare for it. A conversation might take a questionable turn. Or participants might get upset. Someone might bait you or others into arguing. How will you respond?
- Check your own assumptions, biases, and generalizations. Each person’s experiences are unique, despite whatever similarities they share. Respect their individuality, not expecting them to be the spokesperson for a certain group or experience unless they assume that role.
- Acknowledge that each of us has more to learn.

Remember: Practice does not make perfect, but it does improve the odds of a positive outcome. Role-playing in your mind or in front of a mirror is helpful. Even better is practicing with others.

I hope you find these ideas helpful. To be alive is to be constantly learning.

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