Managing the Challenges of the Political Season: Bullying Prevention & Response

A Resource For School Administrators, Educators, Students and Communities

The Iowa Bullying Prevention Council created this manual.

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Introduction

As we begin the school year, we should be aware of the impact this year's election may have on our Pre-K12 schools. Regardless of one's politics, heated political rhetoric has the potential to increase levels of fear and anxiety among students of all ages, especially among ethnic, racial and linguistic minorities, children with disabilities, and LGBTQ youth. Heated political discussion, fear and anxiety are not limited to home, but according to recent reports comes with children to school and may be identified as bullying, harassment or discrimination (Costello, 2016). Such behavior violates Iowa's Anti-Bullying and Anti-Harassment law and may violate federal protections provided by Title IV of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Title II of the 1990 ADA Act, Section 504, 1973 Rehabilitation Act and Title IX, enforced by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights.

As educators, you are critically important to modeling behavior and providing instruction to your fellow educators, students, families and communities on how to create safe and supportive environments in which *all* students can learn and engage in civic dialogue in a responsible manner. The following information and resources may be shared with your school board, administrators, colleagues, students, families and community members.

This political season is different.

This political season is impacting young people in a manner we have not seen in previous election years.

> *"Teachers report an increase in anger and 'acting out' among students and a decreased ability to engage in civil discourse. Discussions turn into shouting matches, verbal hostility and sometimes-even fights… 'Students have become very hostile to opposing points of view, regardless of the topic. Any division now elicits anger and personal attacks' a Jefferson, Georgia High School Teacher wrote, 'Any division now elicits anger and personal attacks.'"*
>
> - Southern Poverty Law Center Study, 2016

> *"Our history is littered with examples of political bullying. Political candidates are constantly given a free pass to act in a way that we would never tolerate in our own children."*
>
> - Jenn Savedge, 2016

> *"Regardless of one's politics, the impact of this year's political rhetoric on K 12 schools is huge. It has produced increasing levels of fear and anxiety among students of all ages. Fear levels are becoming especially high among ethnic, racial and linguistic minority, and LGBTQ youth. Perception is reality. Skin color, clothing, accent, religious beliefs, perceived sexual orientation or identity all play into rhetoric-based "reality". Many students have been targeted; many, regardless of their place of birth, are worried about being deported. Teachers have noted an increase in incidents of harassment, intimidation and/or bullying directed at students whose backgrounds are targeted by the rhetoric."*
>
> - Mike Donlin, School Safety Center, WA

"Iowa is not devoid of issues in schools and communities during this political season. One story from central Iowa focuses on student language and behaviors at a sporting event. This story ended when administration, and students directly reached out to make amends and heal the harm. At another community in western Iowa students and community protested the use of their high school by a presidential candidate they felt had caused racial issues with his political rhetoric. In a third instance remarks by an Iowa US Representative at the national political convention led to a document published in the Des Moines Register, "A Teachable Moment." 100 Iowa Social Studies educators signed the document. Very recently a small town in western Iowa hosted a parade where a float depicted a presidential candidate in prison garb and in a cage. Those attending the parade were handed water filled balloons to throw at the person in the cage. It is entirely possible you will experience repercussions from these events as the political season continues to heat up. **"**

- Penny Bisignano, Iowa Bullying Prevention Specialist

Before School Begins: Find and Review

Actions to ensure all students feel safe at school may begin before the first bell rings. Prior to the start of the school year, it is recommended that schools review district policies as well as state and federal guidance on the issues of bullying, harassment and discrimination.

Bullying, Harassment and Civil Rights

The Office for Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Education provides "significant guidance" through publication of "Dear Colleague Letters." Many of these letters address school district's responsibility for maintaining a safe learning environment for all students. For example:

October 26, 2010

Dear Colleague:

In recent years, many state departments of education and local school districts have taken steps to reduce bullying in schools. The U.S. Department of Education (Department) fully supports these efforts. Bullying fosters a climate of fear and disrespect that can seriously impair the physical and psychological health of its victims and create conditions that negatively affect learning, thereby undermining the ability of students to achieve their full potential. The movement to adopt anti-bullying policies reflects schools' appreciation of their important responsibility to maintain a safe learning environment for all students. I am writing to remind you, however, that some student misconduct that falls under a school's anti-bullying policy also may trigger responsibilities under one or more of the federal antidiscrimination laws enforced by the Department's Office for Civil Rights (OCR). As discussed in more detail below, by limiting its response to a specific application of its anti-bullying disciplinary policy, a school may fail to properly consider whether the student misconduct also results in discriminatory harassment.

For more information the State of Iowa's policies and practices regarding bullying and harassment and Federal guidance on schools' obligations to respond to harassment, please see the following:

- Iowa Department of Education, Anti-Bullying/Anti-Harassment Webpage
- U.S. Department of Education, Dear Colleague Letter on Harassment Based on Race, Religion, and National Origin (2015)
- Bullying, Harassment, and Civil Rights Video - Overview of School Districts' Federal Obligation to Respond to Harassment
- Summary of Laws and Policies regarding schools' obligations to address bullying and harassment
- U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Dear Colleague Letter on Bullying of Students with Disabilities (2014)
- U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Dear Colleague Letter on Harassment and Bullying (2010)
- U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Checklist for a Comprehensive Approach to Addressing Harassment
- U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Harassment Fact Sheet

Bullying/Harassment Policy - Review your district/agency policy for bullying/harassment as it relates to adult-to-adult behavior, as it relates to student-to-student behavior and as it relates to adult and student behavior. Remember, when staff know or should have known about a bullying/harassment incident the staff member is obligated to follow the reporting policy. Best practice guidelines compel staff to follow-up with the student who engaged in bullying behavior and with the student who was the target of bullying behavior. (When bullying behaviors occur or are reported safety plans need to be developed, followed and reviewed!)

Public Conduct on Agency Premises Policy - Some schools/agencies have policies to cover the behavior of everyone on the school campus/agency property. Review your district/agency policies regarding the behavior of guests on the premises.

School Expectations - Review your school/district culture/climate expectations/rules. Schools implementing PBIS, Character Counts, Olweus Bullying Prevention Program and other similar programs have established common expectations and common language. Review the expectations and be prepared to use the common language when interacting with colleagues and students.

When School Starts: Take Action

This year's political campaign has the potential to create a hostile school environment and lead to increased fear and anxiety. As a full staff, begin the year with a focus on creating a safe, welcoming and supportive school climate and culture in which all students can

learn. Below are some suggestions you may utilize to create/sustain this culture as part of your bullying prevention efforts.

- Discuss and develop strategies to address negative political rhetoric
- Discuss with all staff strategies to create a safe, welcoming and supportive environment. Include school volunteers in the plan.
- Consider building a school-wide conversation into a start of the year promoting positive school culture and inclusiveness.
- Ensure safe spaces for students and staff to go to, to talk.
- Incorporate lessons about respectful behavior into existing initiatives/social-emotional instruction.
- Build discussions into developmentally appropriate lessons across curricula. Don't ignore the impact on your students, staff and families.
- Think of ways to involve and talk/listen with families.
- Involve the district's Equity Coordinator in ensuring the district's anti-bullying and harassment policies and civil rights grievance procedures have been updated to include the new sample policies issued in September, 2015 by IASB and DE which align with the requirements in the April 4, 2011 Dear Colleague Letter.

Intervene Consistently

When educators witness or are made aware of instances of bullying, harassment and discrimination, immediate and consistent action must be taken.

When bullying behavior is observed: Kids learn what's acceptable based on how we respond. We have to be observant and intervene consistently. The following recommended adult responses have been adapted from Rosalind Wiseman and the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. The Intervening person should make sure to:

1. Stop the behavior. Practice on-the-spot responses using the common language developed during your anti-bullying training as well as referencing your school-wide expectations. Examples:
    - "We treat each other with respect here."
    - "When you are using the word _____, to put people down, you are using words that are unacceptable in this school."
    - "We do not say _____ to put someone down in this school.
2. Support the student who was bullied. In a way that allows him or her to regain control of his or her emotions and to "save face.". (This may be direct, i.e., "I'm sorry that happened." Or indirect by following up with them in private.)
3. Address the student(s) who bullied by naming the bullying behavior and restate the expectations in simple positively stated terms. (See the Ethical Leadership and Civil Discourse Guidance by Rosalind Wiseman on You Tube for practicing words to use.) Reinforce any positive bystander behavior with appreciation or information about how to act in the future.

4. Follow up as needed by reporting the bullying incident or imposing appropriate consequences! Do not make "empty threats." Do not tell students they will have negative consequences that you are not willing to deliver.
5. Take steps to make sure the student who was bullied will be protected from future bullying.

6. Be brief, clear, and behavior specific throughout your interaction. Be firm and determined, but not overly emotional.

When a Student Reports Bullying to You

: Only 36% of bullying incidents are reported to educators (Petrosino, Guckenbury, DeVoe, & Hanson, 2010). Adults must take action when bullying is reported in order to stop it, and ensure that students continue to report bullying. As a general guideline, always take reports of bullying very seriously and assume that they are largely correct.

According to Stan Davis, with the Youth Voice Project, students find the following adult responses to be most helpful across all mistreated students:

- Listen to me
    - Validate feelings. Don't interrupt to give advice or share experiences until the student is finished talking.
- Give advice or share experiences. This is defined as "giving reassurance & encouragement vs. being told what they should do." (Advice does not include blaming the target or holding them responsible for stopping the bullying)
- Check in with me afterwards - follow up!

When bullying is seen, suspected or reported, teachers must follow school and district procedures for bullying investigation. Teachers may be unaware if an incident is isolated or part of multiple incidents which create a hostile learning environment. Therefore, teachers should report incidents to the school or district investigator, follow procedure for parent contact and follow up, and inquire about putting a safety plan in place.

Existing Resources to Support Your Efforts

- Equity Education webpage of the Iowa Department of Education website.
- Anti-Bullying/Anti-Harassment webpage of the Iowa Department of Education
- Stopbullying.gov
- Teaching Tolerance.org
- Anti-Defamation League
- Promote Prevent Anti-Bullying Resources
- PACER Center
- **Protecting Our Muslim Youth from Bullying: The Role of the Educator**

Ongoing Efforts Throughout the School Year

Unfortunately, the work of bullying prevention isn't limited to the first part of the school year. While a safe and welcoming school environment can be established right away, it is only maintained through a school community committed to ensuring that bullying, harassment and discrimination do not occur. While students may engage in, witness and/or report such behaviors, it is up to the adults to take action and implement school policies and disciplinary procedures to stop them.

Here are ways to maintain an emphasis on anti-bullying throughout the school year

- Promote consistent school-wide efforts to teach and monitor pro-social behaviors
- Refer to the 10 Best Practices in Bullying Prevention and Intervention
- Consider Classroom Meetings or Advisor/Advisee groups that are dedicated to discussions on civic and civil discourse and respectful communications
- Involve student leadership groups in creating activities to promote respect amongst peers
- Build on October's National Bullying Prevention Month

Consider listing some of the above resources on your district's webpage.

Curricular Resources

Often, bullying prevention occurs outside of the curriculum – something extra discussed within the school handbook, during assemblies or a few times a year in homeroom. Comprehensive bullying prevention programs are most successful when "the program is integrated into the school curriculum," ((Whitted & Dupper, 2005, p. 169). During an election year, schools will typically incorporate debates and mock elections into their social studies curricula. Given the heated political rhetoric this year, and the assumption that such activities may be controversial, it is important to frame such activities carefully.

Debate Watching

Political debates can provide important learning opportunities. When election time comes around—whether it is a presidential election or a local contest for mayor, city council member, governor or member of Congress—these debates give teachers an opening to explore candidates, issues and the electoral process with their students.

Debate Watching Guide – Anti-Defamation League

But what about our traditional mock election?

Many schools recognize Election Day by participating in a school-wide "election" between the two presidential candidates. Given the divisive political rhetoric this campaign season, which can leave students and school staff feeling frustrated and unsafe, schools should give special consideration to holding such a school-wide event.

> *Make it high quality.* Schools who feel strongly that it is important to have students participate in a mock election, need to ensure the use of high quality lessons which frame the election as an act of civic participation rather than one based on hateful

political rhetoric or parental political preferences. In order to do this, we suggest utilizing the following resources and best practices:

- Use primary sources. Ensure that students are exploring actual text or video of the political candidates, not just what they've heard or been told specific to any one candidate's position. C-SPAN provides primary sources through the C-SPAN Classroom Campaign 2016
- Encourage students to first determine their political positions, and then find a candidate who stands for these beliefs.
- Ensure that all elections are discussed, not simply the presidential election. This can include local, state and federal races.
- iCIVICS teaches students how government works by having them experience it directly. Through our games, the player steps into any role – a judge, a member of Congress, a community activist fighting for local change, even the President of the United States – and does the job they do. Educational video games allow for concepts to happen to us. They convey information while teaching skills for effective civic engagement.
- The goal of any mock election is to encourage civic discourse among students. Framing any election related activities to be specific to students exploring multiple perspectives on any issue while being held to high standards of discussion and debate.

Or, skip it altogether. Given that the outcome of school based elections are often decided by the majority, schools should be especially cautious of further marginalizing students with non-dominant identities. It would be especially troubling for students who are experiencing fear or anxiety about the election and how the outcome may influence them and their family. In place of a mock election, other topics relating to voting could be explored, such as:

- Facing History and Ourselves provides a number of resources specific to democracy and civic participation.
- Explore the history and current state of voting rights in the United States.

Classroom Meetings

Class meetings are designed to build a sense of community and belonging and to help develop a set of norms about bullying and other important issues. They are designed to help students learn more about themselves, and their feelings and reactions and those of their peers. They are also designed to provide students with opportunities to express their personal opinions in a relatively safe and supportive environment. (Olweus bullying Prevention Program)

Steps to organize and lead class meetings:

- It works best to have students sit in a circle or half circle.
- Class meetings should be held regularly, preferable at least once a week. Thirty to 40 minutes for upper primary, intermediate and high school. Fifteen to 30 minutes for younger students.

- It works best to have the meetings at a specific time each week.
- Establish ground rules for the meetings.
- The teacher is the leader or facilitator of the group but allow students to guide the discussion when it is appropriate.
- It is important to keep class meetings fresh and interesting for students.

Information taken from *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program Teacher Guide,* Hazelden Publishing

Project Citizen

Project Citizen is an interdisciplinary curricular program for middle, secondary, and postsecondary students, youth organizations, and adult groups that promote competent and responsible participation in local and state government. The program helps participants learn how to monitor and influence public policy. In the process, they develop support for democratic values and principles, tolerance, and feelings of political efficacy.

Service Learning

Service Learning is a teaching and **learning** strategy that integrates meaningful community **service** with instruction and reflection to enrich the **learning** experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities. (Learn and Serve America National **Service Learning** Clearinghouse)

Resources to Utilize For Instruction and Reflection

The following resource list includes curricular guides for instruction and reflection:

- Act Up History Project -Oral Interviews
- Stonewall Uprising – American Experience – PBS -
- Marsha P Johnson - Challenging Gender Boundaries
- Sometimes You Work With the Democrats & Sometimes You Riot – Ten Years that Shook San Francisco
- White Fragility
- United States Holocaust Museum
- Museum of Tolerance
- National Civil & Human Rights Museum

Teaching Controversial Issues

Teaching controversial issues can be difficult, and all too often are avoided. It is imperative that students understand such issues, consider multiple perspectives and develop a personal position. It is equally imperative that students learn how to engage in civil discourse, with respect given to those with different position and in a manner that allows all students to feel safe

The following resource list includes lessons and guides for teaching controversial issues; both historically and in the present:

- Facing History and Ourselves (Note: some materials cost)

    - Bullying
    - Democracy and Civic Engagement
    - Anti-Semitism and Religious Intolerance
    - Race in U.S. History
- Anti-Defamation League
    - Outreach
    - Books Matter
    - Anti-Bias Workshops and Programs
    - 9 Ways to Teach about the Election
        - Debate Watching Guide
    - Table Talk: Family Conversations about Current Events
    - Echoes and Reflections
- Book: The Political Classroom (Hess and McAvoy)
    - Article based off book: How do teachers political views influence teaching about controversial issues?
    - Polarization of Congress
- Southern Poverty Law Center
    - Hate in the Race
    - The Trump Effect
- Teaching Tolerance (Loads of resources here)
    - Anti-Bias Framework
    - Civil Discourse in the Classroom
    - Critical Practices for Anti-Bias Education
    - Let's Talk: Discussing Race, Racism, and Other Difficult Topics with Students
    - Responding to Hate and Bias at School
    - Speak Up at School
    - Mix It Up at Lunch
    - Webinars
    - Film Kits
    - Classroom Resources
    - Professional Development
    - Magazine
    - Perspectives for a Diverse America
- ProCon
- 10 Websites for Teaching about Issues in This Election Season
- Philosophy for Children
    - Planning, Teaching, and Assessing
- Congressional Medal of Honor Foundation
    - Note: Their materials focus on character development around the Medal of Honor recipients. They will come out to do free workshops around their materials. All of their materials are free.
- Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility
    - Teaching about Controversial or Difficult Issues
    - 10 Point Model
- Kettering Foundation Deliberative Democracy

    - Iowa Partners
    - Democratic Practices
    - Publications
- Articles:
    - Teaching Difficult Topics with Primary Sources
    - Challenges and Opportunities for Discussion of Controversial Issues in Racially Pluralistic Schools
    - Deliberating Controversial Issues as Part of Civic Education
    - Teaching Controversial Issues
    - Teaching Controversial Issues and Critical Thinking
    - Inclusive Practices for Managing Controversial Issues in the Classroom
    - Controversial Issues: To Teach or Not to Teach? That is the Question!
    - Discussing Controversial Public Issues in the Classroom
- Discussion Based Teaching and Handling Controversial Issues in the Classroom
- Zinn Education Project
- Show Some Respect Coalition

Student and Student Leader Resources

Preventing political-based bullying means getting students engaged in their communities and in the civic process. The following resources are meant for student leaders, student clubs, and can be used in the classroom setting. These are potential ideas and resources to help students see their part in the political process. We strongly encourage you to allow the students to also come up with any of their own ideas.

Student Clubs

Student clubs must be student-driven, student-initiated, and student-led. These resources for various student clubs are potential ideas. Students must be involved in any process including decisions of what activities to implement. Student clubs may include National Honor Society, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), Student Council, political party clubs and other community-based student clubs. Here is a list of resources they may be helpful to Student Clubs at your school.

- Teaching Tolerance http://www.tolerance.org/
- Anti-Defamation League http://www.adl.org/
- Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) http://www.glsen.org/
- Iowa Safe Schools – GSAs http://www.iowasafeschools.org/
- American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) https://www.aclu.org/
- First Amendment Center http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/
- National Association of Student Councils https://www.nasc.us/?SSO=true
- National Honor Society https://www.nhs.us/?SSO=true
- Fellowship of Christian Athletes https://www.fca.org

Conclusion

Bullying, Harassment and Discrimination are behaviors have been documented for years. While these types of behaviors do not originate in the heated political rhetoric of an election year, they may be amplified. The "bully pulpit" of politics is no longer reserved for ideologies and issues; and instead has taken aim at individuals and identities. As students repeat and reinforce behaviors modeled to them in the political arena, educators must be prepared to help students understand how the bad behaviors of politicians fit – or don't - into the school rules and scope of civic discourse; ensuring all students and school staff have a safe learning environment.

If you have questions or would like further resources, please contact:

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