



August 29, 2022 • 11 min • Vol. 80 • No. 1

Responding to Intolerance Through Community Building



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A new study reveals four responses school leaders typically take toward conflict among students—but one rises above the rest for success.

Abstract



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Abstract

Responding to Challenges

Unpacking Conflict
Approaches

Commitment Matters

Building Community
Together

Michelle Kenup is a principal of a racially diverse high school in a politically conservative community in the southeastern United States.¹ One of her chief goals is to prepare young people to be respectful and thoughtful community members. This isn't a platitude for her. She wants her students to be able to wrestle with local and national political issues and to teach them, in her words, "how to have that dialogue and that disagreement without it turning violent or angry or so aggressive."

Unfortunately, like many leaders, Kenup has found that the national political environment as well as local political and racial divisions, is making that goal more difficult. In Kenup's district, the hottest topics are bound up in broader debates on race and immigration. Harmful acts of intolerance are common, such as students directing chants of "build the wall" toward immigrant classmates. As she explains, "When it starts boiling over outside, sometimes it will carry over here [in school]."

Principal Kenup tries to be proactive, regularly communicating the importance of respect and civility to her students. She employs discipline to address violations of these norms. For example, when a white student told a Latino classmate he "needed to go back to Mexico," Kenup initiated discipline proceedings and facilitated a discussion between the victimizer and the victim. She also reported the affair to the white student's father. Unfortunately, parents are sometimes unsupportive of her approach. While she was hoping that the

victimizer's family would be a partner in the school's efforts to treat his classmates with respect, this was not the case.

The challenges Principal Kenup faces are familiar to many school leaders. Between the 2015–16 school year and the 2017–18 school year, hate crimes in U.S. schools (which most commonly targeted students because of their race and national origin) increased nationwide by 81 percent, according to the Governmental Accounting Office (2021). Many public schools also have become sites of heightened partisan contention since 2016. Not infrequently, political conflict between students has been expressed in the form of racist assaults (Costello, 2017; Rogers et al., 2017; Rogers et al., 2019).

Responding to Challenges

What might it look like for principals to lead in ways that not only respond to intolerance, but foster a multiracial democracy? We have been exploring this question over the last few years (with our colleague Alexander Kwako) through a nationally representative survey of 500 high school principals and through multiple rounds of interviews with a diverse subset of roughly two dozen of these principals (Kwako, Rogers, & Kahne, 2022).

The data have led us to identify four prominent responses school leaders have used toward intolerance:

1. *Avoidance*: Directing staff to avoid discussion of controversial issues;
2. *Discipline*: Disciplining students for hateful and/or racist behavior;
3. *Communication*: Communicating the importance of tolerance and respect.
4. *Community Building*: Established practices aimed at building community.

Below, we detail ways that principals employed each of these strategies to explore the strengths and limits of these approaches.



Between the 2015–16 school year and the 2017–28 school year, hate crimes in U.S. schools (which most commonly targeted students because of their race and national origin) increased nationwide by 81 percent.

Leading with Avoidance

Because Kenup had limited success in preventing the behavior linked to the political divisions among her students, she established restraints on what topics students could discuss in class. After an incident in which a white student taunted his immigrant classmates by talking about a recent high-profile immigration case in the news, Kenup informed students and teachers that they should not introduce politically charged ideas during class and should not discuss immigration issues at all. She told them: "This is a safe place. We ... are Switzerland. We've got too many people coming in with too many backstories, too much history. And if we don't remain neutral ... then it just becomes a nightmare for everybody."

In many respects, Kenup's directive to avoid controversial topics signaled a lowering of expectations. She wanted students to engage in dialogue across difference, but that priority conflicted with her

commitment to create a safe learning environment for all students—so she decided that avoidance was easiest.

Leading with Discipline

While many principals employ discipline as one of several strategies for addressing intolerance, some principals lead with a disciplinary approach. Principal Tom Reynolds, for example, tries to manage hateful and hostile behavior in his midwestern community mainly through punishment. Over the last decade, hostility has grown among a sizable group of conservative white students as the school's Black and Latino enrollment has jumped from less than 1 percent to almost 10 percent. Some white students have spewed racist epithets, prevented students of color from sitting at particular cafeteria tables, and initiated fistfights in the hallways when challenged for wearing MAGA hats.

Reynolds begins each school year by communicating the school's stance on hateful and racist acts: "There will be no tolerance ... If you screw up, we the administrators, we will hammer you." Indeed, when students violate rules, administrators "step in" quickly, meeting with students and parents to apply disciplinary consequences. In addition, a full-time police liaison is stationed at the school, and she has the authority to use local hate crime laws to issue municipal citations—a strategy that the school used to address violations that happened on social media.

By leading with discipline, Reynolds has "helped curb"—but not eliminate—hateful behavior. Reynolds reports that his school still experiences two or three intolerant incidents requiring discipline each week. Students know that when they experience hateful acts, they can "find the administration or a teacher later, informally, and ask for some help in dealing with a situation." But Reynolds acknowledges that this strategy of control and containment is far from a resolution. "For most of our students of color, there's probably this leeriness every day," he says.

Leading with Communication

Although most principals we surveyed tell their students to treat each other with respect, in most instances such messages aim primarily to prohibit insensitive or hateful behavior. Yet in some cases, principals place emphasis on communicating a positive ethical vision, encouraging students to embrace empathy through their words and deeds.

One such principal is David Franklin, who leads an East Coast magnet high school that serves diverse working-class communities, including many immigrant students. Even as Franklin works to foster a school culture in which "everyone feels welcome," challenges sometimes emerge. For example, after the 2020 mass murder of Muslims in a New Zealand mosque, one of his students, an immigrant from the Middle East, wrote a paper arguing that the killer was a hero. Word about the

student's paper spread widely, and other students began to make threats against the student because of it.

Franklin chose to treat this event as a teachable moment. After hearing about the gossip and conflict the paper generated, he spent a full morning visiting every classroom for a few minutes. Franklin talked about what had happened and about the values that he hoped students would enact moving forward—"tolerance and empathy." He conveyed that "if we have issues, we support each other and [support] bringing" issues out into the open. For Franklin, the decision to talk with students, classroom by classroom, rather than issue a statement to the entire student body over the intercom (or hold an emergency assembly) reflected his belief that "when the conversation is that important, I want to be as close to the students as possible."

Leading with Building Community

Finally, a few principals we interviewed looked to students as agents for creating a more caring school culture. For example, principal Alexa Winter described how students in her racially and economically diverse southwestern high school look out for their classmates. When she walked into the cafeteria a few days into the school year, she found that the 14 newcomer students who recently had arrived from other countries already "had attached to different student groups and started to acclimate to this new [school] culture." This happened because

student leaders across different groups had reached out to the newcomers—without adults "even asking them to."

Winter, her staff, and her students describe this as "the Valley way," a reference to the school's name. A key to developing this school culture has been Winter's purposeful effort to hire teachers committed to treating all students with dignity. The most important questions she asks prospective teachers are, "Who are you as a person? What do you know about diversity and students? How are you going to treat the diverse population?" When teachers act respectfully toward all students, the students in turn "treat [other] kids with the same respect."

Winter notes that in those instances when a new teacher does not fully "respect all cultures," such as treating a transgender student differently than their classmates, students take action. "Those kids will come to me immediately and say, this teacher . . . They're not a "Valley" teacher. There's something wrong." Students also call out newcomers to the school who violate norms of tolerance. The students would see peers picking on special needs students and inform them, "That's just not how we do it."

The effects of peer-to-peer socialization are powerful. This is not to suggest that other schools don't also have equally kind and caring students or teachers, but that leadership practices which intentionally promote a welcoming culture have ripple effects.

Winter also has developed structures that encourage students with various backgrounds to interact with one another around projects of shared concern. Each month she meets with 90 representatives of student programs, groups, or advisory classes as part of what she calls the Inter Committee Communication (or ICC), which encompasses the diverse identities and experiences of the student body. Winter invites ICC members to plan student activities and encourages them to talk with one another about how to create a more inclusive and tolerant campus, such as by talking about what can be done to change racial inequalities in the school's suspension numbers. In this way, Winter has intentionally fostered what many social scientists refer to as bridging social capital.

Unpacking Conflict Approaches

As you have likely surmised, these approaches are not equal in creating safe learning environments amid political and racial tensions in society.

In most cases, avoidance and discipline offer, at best, only a temporary reduction in harm. Such endeavors may enable educators to open space for meaningful and respectful interactions across differences by lowering the temperature or halting or limiting assaults during periods of acute crisis. But often, they lead to an uneasy truce. These approaches do not get at the root cause of the problem and do not prepare young people to view themselves and their peers as part of a

shared community—one in which they participate together respectfully across lines of difference.

By contrast, although they did not use this term, principals who foregrounded community were striving to promote a multiracial democracy. Their community-building strategies (and at times their communication strategies) sought to create school communities in which students internalized the importance of valuing one another's varied lived experiences and identities and of developing commitments to work together on shared problems. Indeed, our interviews revealed that, by providing an opportunity for youth to experience inclusion and belonging and by helping to develop internal capacities to promote such a community, these leaders had created contexts that have transformative potential.

The principals we surveyed who are committed to community building employed a range of approaches. For example, some supported curricular and extracurricular opportunities for students to explore their own identities while appreciating different identities and perspectives. Some principals elicited help from student groups in fostering respect among their classmates. Others provided professional development for teachers on restorative practices or on pedagogical practices that help students engage respectfully across differences. Some examples of useful resources for educators and system leaders include The Aspen Institute's Education and Society Program, Dignity in Schools, Harvard's Project Zero, *The New York*

Times, National Museum of African American History and Culture, Facing History and Ourselves, Greater Good in Education, and Learning for Justice.

Commitment Matters

Given the need for a community-building approach, we wondered whether certain features of districts, of schools, or of principals were associated with principals adopting this focus for their leadership. In fact, analysis of our national survey reveals that two factors mattered a great deal.



Principals who were active in their communities personally were 36.1 percent more likely to focus on community-building within their school.

First, with controls in place for school and community demographics, principals who were active in their communities personally were 36.1 percent more likely to focus on community-building within their school than the average principal. Second, we found that when district leadership emphasized civic participation—when, for example, district leaders talked frequently with principals about the importance of promoting civic engagement—principals were 35.8 percent more likely to employ community-building supports than average principals. Significantly, this was the case in all kinds of communities—urban, suburban, rural, conservative, and liberal.

These findings are important. They point to factors in school leadership development that school systems can prioritize and build on. When principals personally participate in civic life, they are much more likely to build school communities in which diverse groups of students learn to work well together. These goals go even further when district leaders use some of their time with principals to discuss ways to promote a healthy democratic school community.

Building Community Together

To be sure, the diversity young people bring to public schools enables a rich exchange of cultural experiences and perspectives for identifying and resolving intellectual puzzles and social problems. But diversity in schools can make misunderstandings and conflicts more likely. When the broader society is riven by racial antagonism and political

disagreement, moreover, conflicts between students are more likely to lead to incidents of hate and intolerance. Divisiveness in society, in other words, makes the work of educating for a multiracial democracy both more challenging and more urgent.

The most promising leadership strategy to address this tension seeks to build community and understanding. Consider Andre Ibrahim, the principal of a racially and socioeconomically diverse high school in New England, who provides multiple avenues for students to share their interests and concerns and to practice restorative relations when conflicts arise. Ibrahim tells his students, "It doesn't matter if you were born in this town, or if you were born in Mississippi, or born in California. If you ended up here, then somehow we are tasked with making sure we take care of each other ... [and] each other is everybody."

Addressing intolerance, and, more broadly, leading toward a vibrant multiracial democracy, demands a school community where we address racism and intergroup conflict while taking care of vulnerable students. When we do, we empower all of our students to take care of one another.

1 We use pseudonyms for all principals and schools in this article.

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