

Executive Summary

Educating for a Diverse Democracy

The Chilling Role
of Political Conflict
in Blue, Purple, and Red
Communities

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with the

Educating for a Diverse Democracy
Research Team

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“If the tempest of political strife were to be let loose upon our Common Schools, they would be overwhelmed with sudden ruin.”

HORACE MANN, 1848

Today, there is a pressing need to prepare all youth to take part in a diverse democracy—a democracy in which people from different communities and with different political beliefs, interests, identities and ways of thinking come together to address common problems and build a shared future. To create a thriving diverse democracy, youth need opportunities to explore the full stories and histories of varied groups, to build capacities for respectful evidence-based dialogue and to develop commitments to robust civil liberties and recognition of the dignity of fellow citizens.

This study finds that US public high schools are increasingly limited in their ability to support this vital goal.

Specifically, public schools increasingly are targets of conservative political groups focusing on what they term “Critical Race Theory,” as well as issues of sexuality and gender identity. Schools also are impacted by political conflict tied to the growing partisan divides in our society. These political conflicts have created a broad chilling effect that has limited opportunities for students to practice respectful dialogue on controversial topics and made it harder to address rampant misinformation. The chilling effect also has led to marked declines in general support for teaching about race, racism, and racial and ethnic diversity. Principals also report sizable growth in harassment of LGBTQ+ youth. There is a clear need for educators, students, parents and community members to stand up for educational approaches that can strengthen our diverse democracy.

Conducted by the Institute for Democracy, Education and Access at UCLA and by the Civic Engagement Research Group at UC Riverside, this study is based on a nationally representative survey of 682 public high school principals and 32 follow up interviews during the summer of 2022.

This study is unique for two reasons:

- ▶ It locates schools within Blue, Purple or Red Congressional Districts to assess how the partisan context of the school relates to both political conflict and democratic practices at that school.
- ▶ It builds on a similar principal survey conducted in 2018, enabling researchers to examine ways that school practices and their relationship to partisanship have changed over the last four years.

Key Findings

Political Conflict is Pervasive and Growing, Particularly in Purple Communities

[I've seen a] "growing divide... pretty much down political lines [that] is making it hard to manage a school community—more than any other era in my 20 years of administrative experience."

Utah Principal

More than two-thirds (69%) of principals surveyed reported substantial political conflict over hot button issues. In many schools, parents or community members have sought to limit or challenge: Teaching about issues of race and racism (50%); Policies and practices related to LGBTQ+ student rights (48%); Student access to books in the school library (33%); or Social Emotional Learning (39%).

Principals at schools in politically divided (Purple) communities were far more likely than those in Red and Blue communities to report acute levels of community conflict. Principals in Purple communities were nearly twice as likely to report community conflict related to LGBTQ+ issues and were over 50% more likely to report multiple instances of community level conflict related to teaching and learning about issues of race and racism, school library books, and Social Emotional Learning.

And political conflict has increased. Almost half of principals (45%) report that the amount of community level conflict during the 2021–2022 school year was “more” or “much more” than prior to the pandemic. Three percent said it was less.

The increasing political conflict often results from intentional and organized efforts that have targeted Purple communities in particular. Principals said that small groups of vocal parents and community members are leading campaigns against schools and districts. Some parents, connected to conservative national organizations such as “Moms for Liberty,” are aggressively challenging and even threatening educators over policies and curriculum on race, LGBTQ+ rights and other issues. At times, principals said that parents and community members employed anti-democratic practices such as spreading misinformation and employing threatening, denigrating, and violent rhetoric. A North Carolina principal described these advocates as “small clusters of hate.”

These political conflicts have made the already hard work of public education more difficult, undermining school management, negatively impacting staff, and heightening student stress and anxiety. Several principals shared they were reconsidering their own roles in public education in light of the “rage at teachers and rage at administrators” playing out in their communities.

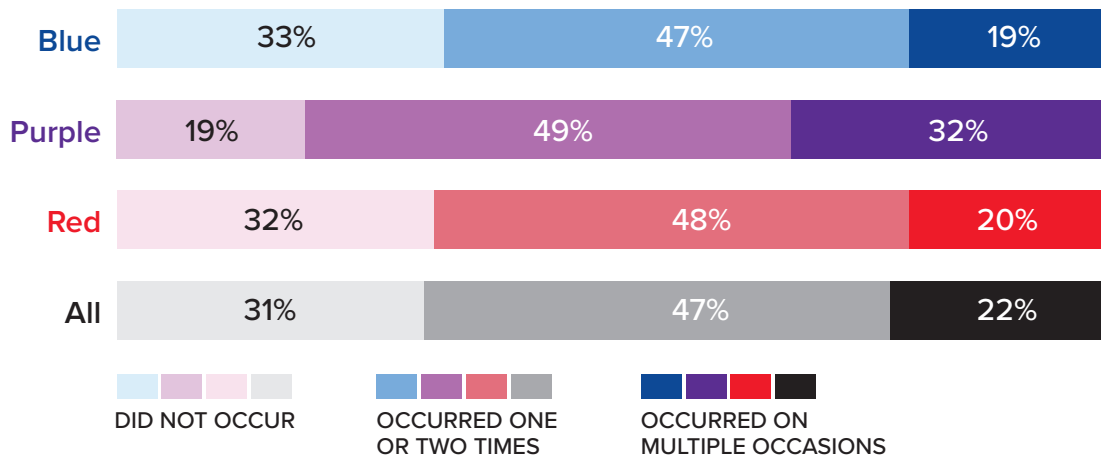
Political Conflict Undermines the Practice of Respectful Dialogue

"I had to come down and help the teacher, like a veteran teacher, who's never had problems having discussions. And the kids were just so stuck in their trenches, they weren't willing to be open to even listen to the other side."

Iowa Principal

Political conflict between students has created significant challenges for public schools. Almost seven-in-ten (69%) of principals report that students made derogatory remarks to liberal or conservative classmates. And this problem was much more likely to occur on multiple occasions in Purple communities.

Principals reporting students have made demeaning or hateful remarks toward classmates for expressing either liberal or conservative views, by partisan context.



Despite these increased challenges, schools in Purple communities were dramatically less likely to provide professional development for their teachers related to teaching about controversial issues than they had been in 2018. Support for this practice in Red communities decreased as well.

Principals reporting that their school or district provided professional development in how to conduct productive discussions of controversial issues, by partisan context in 2018 and 2022.

	2018	2022	% Change 2018–2022
Blue	45%	49%	+ 4%
Purple	54%	33%	-21%
Red	40%	27%	-13%
All	46%	36%	-10%

Political Conflict is making it harder to address misinformation

The only way I think we’re going to get out of a situation like this is teaching kids, and maybe even the greater public at large, what is good information.”

Nebraska Principal

Almost two-thirds (64%) of principals report that parents or community members have challenged the information or media sources used by teachers in their school. This problem is most acute in Purple communities where more than a third (35%) of principals reported it occurred three or more times. And between 2018 and 2022, heightened community-based contention over teachers’ use of media sources and information grew almost three-fold in Purple communities (from 12% to 35%).

Principals reporting that three or more times parents or community have challenged the information or media sources used by teachers, by partisan context in 2018 and 2022.

	2018	2022	% Change 2018–2022
Blue	14%	22%	+ 8%
Purple	12%	35%	+23%
Red	11%	16%	+ 5%
All	12%	22%	+10%

Students are also challenging information provided by teachers and schools. Sixty percent of principals surveyed reported students had rejected information sources used by their teachers and nearly half (49%) of all high school principals reported multiple instances of students making unfounded claims in class based on unreliable media sources. Principals in Purple communities were the most likely to report multiple instances of both of these problems.

Political Conflict leads to declines in support for teaching about race, racism, and racial and ethnic diversity

My superintendent told me in no uncertain terms that I could not address issues of race and bias etc. with students or staff this year. We could not address the deeper learning. He told me, “This is not the time or the place to do this here. You have to remember you are in the heart of Trump country and you’re just going to start a big mess if you start talking about that stuff.”

Minnesota Principal

Nearly half (48%) of all principals, and about two-thirds (63%) of principals in Purple communities, reported that during the 2021–2022 school year, parents or other members of their school communities “sought to limit or challenge ... teaching and learning about issues of race and racism.”

And in Purple communities, almost a quarter (23%) of principals report their school board or district leaders took action to limit teaching and learning about race and racism — more than in Red communities (17%), and almost three times as often as in Blue communities (8%).

There was also a steep decline between 2018 and 2022 in support for teachers to educate about diversity in both Purple and Red communities.

Principals reporting that their school or district provided professional development in ways for students to learn about the literature and history of people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds, by partisan context in 2018 and 2022.

	2018	2022	% Change 2018–2022
Blue	62%	64%	+ 2%
Purple	54%	44%	-10%
Red	60%	33%	-27%
All	59%	46%	-13%

There is substantial political conflict aiming to limit LGBTQ+ protections and sizable growth in harassment of LGBTQ+ youth

Our wonderful school counselors also took abuse from parents—one counselor described to me how a parent screamed at her on the phone and called her a “homo lover.” It’s quite disheartening to work so hard and care for all our students when so many people are being hateful and threatening.

California Principal

Participation in a diverse democracy requires that everyone is treated with dignity and respect. Unfortunately, intolerance of LGBTQ+ youth has been increasing, particularly in Purple communities.

Nearly half (48%) of all principals report that parents or community members sought to challenge or limit LGBTQ+ rights in the 2021–2022 school year. And in Purple communities, principals were nearly twice as likely (24% to 13%) as those in Red or Blue communities to say such attacks occurred multiple times.

Principals in all schools also reported multiple incidents of students making hostile or demeaning remarks toward LGBTQ+ classmates in 2022. Again, the highest rates of harassment and disrespect occur in Purple communities. Principals in Purple communities were more likely (32% to 22%) than principals in Red or Blue communities to report multiple incidents. And the problem is increasing. The percentage of principals indicating multiple attacks on LGBTQ+ students grew across all schools from 15% in 2018 to 24% in 2022. In Purple communities, the figure more than tripled (from 10% to 32%) over the last four years.

Principals reporting students at their school have made hostile and demeaning remarks about LGBTQ+ students multiple times, by partisan context in 2018 and 2022.

	2018	2022	% Change 2018–2022
Blue	20%	22%	+ 2%
Purple	10%	32%	+22%
Red	13%	22%	+ 9%
All	15%	24%	+ 9%

The communities in which principals reported high rates of hostility and disrespect towards LGBTQ+ youth were also the communities in which principals reported fewer efforts to address these concerns. School board and district leadership in Blue communities (67%) was far more likely than leadership in Purple communities (45%) and Red communities (29%) to act proactively to protect such rights.

Standing up for a diverse democracy

I believe that schools should promote diverse thinking, protect students who may be in a minority of thinking or lifestyle, and teach students to respect everyone. ... Teachers and school employees can model acceptance of all, civil discussions and disagreements, and a mode of thought that does not indoctrinate, but allows for developing brains to learn how to become tolerant of all and respectful of all.

Texas Principal

In the face of widespread political attacks, it is notable that many principals energetically advocated educating for a diverse democracy. We identified two factors that were strongly associated with standing up for a diverse democracy.

First, those principals who were themselves civically engaged (those who follow the news and work with groups to improve their community, for example) were far more likely to advance the practices associated with education for a diverse democracy than those who were not. This pattern held in Blue, Purple, and Red communities.

Principals in “ALL” schools reporting provision of professional development support, by level of principal civic engagement.

Professional Development Topic	LESS Engaged	MORE Engaged
Controversial issues discussion	35%	47%
Literature and history of racial and ethnic groups	44%	68%
Assessing credibility of media	57%	70%

Second, the actions of district leaders mattered. Whether in Blue, Purple, or Red communities, high schools in school districts where district leadership explicitly emphasized the importance of civic education were far more likely to support education for a diverse democracy.

Principals in “ALL” schools reporting provision of professional development support, by level of district emphasis on civic education.

Professional Development Topic	LOW Emphasis	HIGH Emphasis
Controversial Issues discussion	29%	56%
Literature and history of racial and ethnic groups	41%	63%
Assessing credibility of media	53%	74%

“An existential moment” for public schools and for our diverse democracy

Public schools have long been viewed as institutions critical to our democracy. Yet as this survey makes clear, today they are under political attack. If we are to further our democracy, we see clear evidence that educational leaders, by emphasizing educational goals tied to a diverse democracy, can make a sizable difference. And, in addition, students, parents and community members cannot be passive or wait for others to act.

The problem with our current moment is not too much democracy, but too little. Public school governance, at its best, brings together diverse members of the community to forge a vision for a shared future — one that embraces the values of a diverse democracy. At this moment, what is needed is for a broad cross-section of the public to stand up for a diverse democracy.