



# Educating for a Diverse Democracy in California

The Growing Challenges  
of Political Conflict  
and Hostile Behavior

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with the

Educating for a Diverse Democracy  
Research Group

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# Educating for a Diverse Democracy in California

There is a pressing need for California 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.

Currently, many California public high schools are experiencing attacks as a result of their efforts to pursue this vital goal. In particular, schools located in politically contested communities 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. Some conflict advanced by parent and community activists has led to more hostile behavior and contentious relationships amongst students.

Moving forward, California educators, students, parents and community members must stand up for educational approaches that can strengthen our diverse democracy. And this is particularly true for schools located in politically contested “Purple” communities.

These findings emerge from a new analysis of California data in [a national study](#) of public high school principals conducted by the Institute for Democracy, Education and Access at UCLA and by the Civic Engagement Research Group at UC Riverside.<sup>1</sup> As part of the broader study, our research team surveyed a sample of 150 California high school principals in summer 2022 and conducted follow-up interviews with 9 of these principals. The 150 California high schools in our analysis are representative of the state in terms of student race, free and reduced lunch enrollment, geographic location, and partisan leaning of the surrounding community.<sup>2</sup>

This California brief focuses attention on the degree to which the partisan leaning of the communities surrounding schools is related to important social and political dynamics in the schools. By placing all 150 schools in their congressional districts, we are able to compare schools in Blue California communities (where the 2020 vote for Donald Trump was less than 45%) to schools in Purple California communities (where the 2020 vote for Donald Trump was between 45% and 54.9%). Since California includes only 2 Red congressional districts (in which the 2020 vote for Donald Trump was 55% or more), we cannot report separately on the small number of schools in such communities.

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## Political conflict is pervasive and growing, particularly in Purple communities

My high school [faced] the whole conspiracy theory that COVID was not real, you don't need to wear face masks, the people are sheep, we're all dupes of the federal government. I held very, very stressful parent meetings. One of the parents was concerning to me personally with his vitriol and his anger and calling me a "liberal communist moron." We had many protests—20 adults appearing in front of my school wearing T-shirts with different slogans about anti-government rhetoric and anti-COVID rhetoric, anti-President Biden rhetoric. They were a very, very virulent, outspoken group of adults that decided to make their last stand with their children at my high school.

Principal of California High School in a Purple community<sup>3</sup>

Almost two-thirds (65%) of California principals surveyed reported substantial local political conflict over hot button educational issues. In many schools, parents or community members have sought to limit or challenge: Teaching about issues of race and racism (51%); Policies and practices related to LGBTQ student rights (49%); Student access to books in the school library (27%); or Social Emotional Learning (30%). These figures are almost identical to the proportion of principals who reported community level conflict across the United States.

Principals leading California high schools in Purple communities were far more likely than those in Blue communities to report that community conflict occurred frequently. Principals in Purple communities were 2.5 times as likely as principals in Blue communities (28% to 12%) to report frequent community conflict related to LGBTQ issues. Similarly, principals in Purple communities were much more likely than those in Blue communities to report frequent instances of community level conflict related to teaching and learning about issues of race and racism (28% to 16%) and school library books (14% to 5%).

Such political conflict over highly charged educational issues is on the rise. More than four in ten California principals (42%) report that the amount of community level conflict during the 2021–2022 school year was "more" or "much more" than prior to the pandemic. Two 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.

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 that 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.

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## Political division and community-level conflict is shaping student interactions

The ground shifted beneath their feet over a year and a half, and there were significant political events, social events that occurred—the murder of George Floyd, Brianna Taylor, and on and on, the rise of Black Lives Matter and the protests, responses to the protest, the blue line flag, the 2020 election and January 6. All these things happened while kids were in spaces that were not with us. And so where they would have come to school and had some conversations about those things in a space where they knew there was a really diverse set of beliefs and experiences around them. And they would have been careful about it typically—our kids are pretty careful about those things when they're able to have those conversations. [But instead] they had them around their dinner table. Or not. They may have had them around a Discord server, or they heard Dad or Mom rant and rave about that one perspective that they have—their family's perspective. And then the media has shifted underneath [their] feet. So if they were home and they were watching CNN or MSNBC or Fox News, as opposed to five years ago, everybody took a stand and retreated to a corner. So our kids came back to school with this very narrow perspective. It was something that we hadn't necessarily seen in the past. We didn't have kids running around with political statements on their hats or shirts necessarily, but I do think that they struggled a little bit to have empathy for groups that they didn't necessarily understand. That came out in a lot of different ways, but it was really complex to actually wrap your head around.

### Principal of a California high school in a Blue community

Political conflict between students has created significant challenges for public schools. 71% of California principals report that students made demeaning or hateful remarks to liberal or conservative classmates. Principals in Purple communities were more than twice as likely as principals in Blue communities to say that this problem occurred frequently.

93% of California high school principals in Purple communities reported that “the level of political division and incivility” at their schools had increased since the beginning of the pandemic. None said it had gotten better.

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## Many California students experience hostility and intolerance in school

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 from a Purple community

Participation in a diverse democracy requires that everyone is treated with dignity and respect. Unfortunately, many California principals noted that intolerant behavior between students is on the rise. 42% of California principals told us that incidence of intolerance had grown since before the pandemic and only 5% said such behavior had diminished. In Purple communities, 64% of principals reported that the level of intolerance had increased and none said that it had declined.

More than three-quarters (78%) of California principals reported that their students had made hostile or demeaning remarks to LGBTQ classmates. Principals leading schools in Purple communities were far more likely than those in Blue communities (38% to 22%) to report that such behavior occurred frequently.

California principals also reported that students at their schools have made hostile and demeaning remarks about students from other racial or ethnic groups. More than a third of principals reported such remarks were directed at White students (36%) or Asian American/Pacific Islander students (41%). Half (50%) of California principals reported racist statements directed at Latinx students and two-thirds (66%) reported such remarks had been made about African American students. That African American students are the recipients of hostile and demeaning remarks more often than any other group of students is particularly striking given that African Americans make up only five percent of all students enrolled in California public schools.

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## While California schools experience similar challenges as schools nationally, there are some hopeful signs that California educators may be responding differently

[We] value the fact that we are diverse, valuing that we have kids from different backgrounds and upbringings ... It's about every student mattering."

Principal in a Purple California community

In many ways, the community conflict and student hostility playing out in California public schools reflect patterns across the nation. The proportion of California principals reporting local community level conflicts (about teaching issues of race and racism, LGBTQ student rights, access to library books, and Social Emotional Learning) is nearly identical to the proportion of principals who are experiencing these challenges across the United States. As is the case nationally, schools in California's Purple communities are most likely to experience these challenges frequently. Similarly, hostile behavior between California students, like such behavior nationally, is most pronounced in Purple communities.

But, whereas, nationally, the heightened political conflict in Purple communities has diminished efforts to educate for a diverse democracy, that pattern *does not* seem to hold in California. Nationally, school and district leaders in Purple communities were 22% less likely than those in Blue communities to speak out about the importance of LGBTQ student rights. But in California, they were equally likely. Similarly, principals in Purple communities across the nation were 20% less likely than in Blue communities to provide professional development to support learning about the literature and history of people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds. In California, schools in Purple communities were actually 5% *more* likely to offer this support than in Blue Communities.

Why is it that local political conflict has had a chilling effect in Purple communities nationally, but not in California? One possible explanation for this divergence is that state policies supporting LGBTQ rights and Ethnic Studies in California send a signal to educators that practices associated with educating for a diverse democracy represent valued professional practice. It is also the case that California's move toward an Ethnic Studies requirement for high school graduation creates a clear incentive for schools and districts to create conditions that will ensure student success.

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## An existential moment for public schools and for our diverse democracy

The pandemic coupled with the social, racial and political unrest in this country has made it difficult to work in public schools. We are in a community that represents the binary political/social/racial divides and our teachers are exhausted.

Principal in a Purple California community

Since the pandemic, working in the school system has been traumatic in many ways. We have been beat up emotionally by parents, blamed for all of the ills of society. We are tired. Cut us some slack. We went into education to help students. Something needs to change or else we will all quit or retire early. It is exhausting.

#### Principal in a Purple California community

California's schools are under political attack as are the values associated with a diverse democracy. Educators have a critical role to play in this moment. They must support students to learn about rich and varied cultural experiences, impressive accomplishments, and deeply problematic shortcomings of our multiracial society and speak out about the importance of treating all members of their school communities with dignity and respect. Ideally, **educators will build strong learning communities that engage students as agents in creating a more caring and respectful school culture.**<sup>4</sup>

The broader public also has a role in countering attacks on public education. 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 and support this priority.

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### There are many ways to do this. Here are just a few

- ▶ Join other members of your community in developing a public statement about your shared commitment to the values of a diverse democracy.
- ▶ Express support for teachers and principals when they communicate their commitment to create a safe and inclusive learning environment.
- ▶ Write a blog, post on social media, or write a letter to your newspaper about why you value your local public schools and about why we need schools to teach our full history and to promote respect for all students.
- ▶ Step up to the podium during the public comment period of local school board meetings and share why it is important to protect LGBTQ student rights and foster learning about the literature and history of diverse members of the community as well as about race and racism.
- ▶ Consider running for your local school board or supporting others to do so. For practical information see <https://www.assistdemocracy.org/>.
- ▶ Organize [diverse coalitions](#) that challenge book bans and other authoritarian or anti-democratic efforts to limit what students learn.<sup>5</sup> Groups like [Book Ban Busters](#) from Red Wine & Blue are supporting individuals and local groups to push back against right wing extremists.<sup>6</sup>
- ▶ Speak out and join others in protest to demonstrate a shared commitment to educating for a diverse democracy. Many California students already are taking up this call. Genesis Kekoa, an 11th grader and president of her school's Black Student Union, was one of hundreds of students in Temecula Unified who protested the school board's ban of critical race theory. "[I hope they realize we're not going to be silent,](#)" she said.<sup>7</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 John Rogers & Joseph Kahne, with Michael Ishimoto, Alexander Kwako, Samuel C. Stern, Cicely Bingener, Leah Raphael, Samia Alkam, & Yvette Conde. “Educating for a Diverse Democracy: The Chilling Role of Political Conflict in Blue, Purple, and Red Communities.” *UCLA’s Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access* and *The Civic Education Research Group* (November 2022), <https://idea.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/educating-for-a-diverse-democracy>
- 2 [Methodological Appendix](#)
- 3 Throughout this report, we include italicized first-person vignettes from principals in our study. These vignettes draw upon direct quotes from principal interviews and from principal open-ended comments in our survey. We only use the principal’s own words. But, for purposes of brevity and with the goal of conveying the principal’s voice, we sometimes leave out redundant phrases and filler words and we do not use ellipses. We note in brackets whenever we have added words.
- 4 John Rogers & Joseph Kahne. “Responding to Intolerance through Community Building,” *Educational Leadership*. 80 no. 1 (2022), <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/responding-to-intolerance-through-community-building>
- 5 See, for example, the statement written by a collection of interfaith clergy in New Jersey articulating the ways that their faith traditions view books of all kinds as a source of learning and growth, and hence their opposition to book banning. <https://montclairlocal.news/book-banning-not-acceptable-letter-to-the-editor/>
- 6 See: <https://redwine.blue/bbb/>
- 7 Allyson Vergara. “Temecula students walk out to protest critical race theory ban,” *The Press Enterprise*. (January 13, 2023), <https://www.pressenterprise.com/2023/01/13/temecula-students-walk-out-to-protest-critical-race-theory-ban/>