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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Executive Summary

"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 frequent 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.

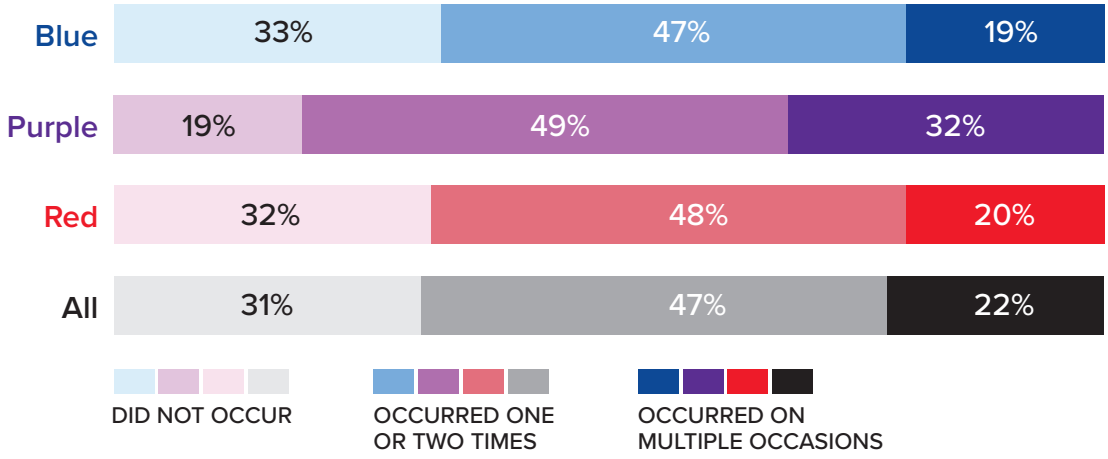
Political Conflict Undermines the Practice of Respectful Dialogue

"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.


Educating for a Diverse Democracy:
The Chilling Role of Political Conflict in
Blue, Purple, and Red Communities

Introduction

"Public schools mirror society. Our society is more divided than ever before in my lifetime and that is reflected in our public schools."

JUSTIN PAYNE,[1] New York high school principal

There is widespread concern today regarding the health of American democracy. Deep partisan divisions fuel angry and hostile political rhetoric that demonizes the opposition. Disagreements over policy are adjudicated through arguments often unmoored from the truth. The nation continues to struggle with how to adequately address the legacy of racism and ensure all have access to equal opportunities and civil liberties. The possibility of Americans coming together to identify common needs and pursue shared goals often feels unattainable. Indeed, the precarious state of US democracy broadly understood is one of the few things members of both political parties agree on. Recent polling finds that sixty-nine percent of Democrats and Republicans believe that our democracy is in danger of collapse.[2]

A longstanding central purpose of public education in the United States has been to strengthen our democracy by preparing students for informed engagement with civic and political life. Today, there is a pressing need to prepare all youth for what we term a *diverse democracy*. A diverse democracy brings together people from different communities with different partisan leanings, experiences, histories, identities, interests, and ways of thinking about critical policy issues to address common problems and build a shared future. This collective project is grounded in commitments to respectful and evidence-based dialogue, robust civil liberties, and the dignity of fellow citizens.

"A diverse democracy brings together people from different communities with different partisan leanings, experiences, histories, identities, interests, and ways of thinking about critical policy issues to address common problems and build a shared future. This collective project is grounded in commitments to respectful and evidence-based dialogue, robust civil liberties, and the dignity of fellow citizens."

A painful irony surrounds this goal. It may be that the very societal dynamics that signal the need for increasing attention to democratic educational goals are making it harder and harder for schools to pursue them. Indeed, public schools across the United States have become the targets of partisan attacks often based on false claims, vilification of opponents, and acts of intimidation. Is this creating a chilling effect? Is this constraining educators' efforts to promote the values, knowledge, and capacities young people need for productive engagement in a diverse democracy?

In what follows, we focus on this possibility. Has community level political conflict and conflict between students constrained efforts to educate for a diverse democracy? In our hyper-partisan moment, do levels of conflict and responses by schools vary by partisan context?

In examining these questions, we focus on high school principals. Their position as school leaders means that they often are the first to hear community complaints and concerns. And their responsibilities call upon them to look across the entire school. This gives them unique first-hand knowledge of how various social and community pressures manifest in schools and the ways that both district leaders and school personnel take action (or not) to foster (or limit) the kinds of school culture and learning opportunities that help prepare young people for life in a diverse democracy.

Prior to diving into our findings, consider, for example, the pressures facing a principal in one politically contested community in the center of the country.

One Principal's Story

OHIO HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPAL SHERWOOD THOMPSON believes that public schools should play an important role in preparing young people to participate in civic life. Yet recently, political conflict has made it extremely difficult for Thompson and his staff to support student learning and well-being, let alone educate for a diverse democracy. In a community that he characterizes as "pretty close to 50/50 Democrat and Republican," the political turmoil has been bubbling up. "Hard core conservatives" from the more affluent side of town have confronted more liberal parents in pitched battles over pandemic policies, curricular issues, library books, and the school's diversity initiatives. "Neither group is happy," Thompson notes, "so everyone remains mad about everything."

Principal Thompson explains that political battles first arose as his school district developed plans for reopening schools that were closed by the pandemic in Spring 2020. COVID "kind of got everyone riled up." School board meetings, which previously were lightly attended gatherings "that would put you to sleep," became standing room only shouting matches. One side asserted: "If you reopen schools, you're going to have the blood of dead kids on your hands," while the other responded: "If you don't reopen immediately without any mitigation strategies, you're falling into the big COVID hoax." These two groups were divided by political affiliation and "there was no middle ground that these people wanted to agree on." Thompson attributes the intensity of their animus to the "political culture at the time" — a reference to the 2020 presidential campaign generally and Donald Trump specifically.

Even after Thompson's school district established clear reopening policies, the hostility continued to grow, due largely to the actions of a small group of "far right" community members. Thompson points out that "most parents — "95% of them — they don't come to board meetings, they don't complain." Yet, vocal "outliers" have had an outsized influence through their contentious tactics. These conservative activists file unceasing lawsuits and public records requests, share "extremely toxic" messages on social media, and "actively lie and misrepresent what members of our administrative team have said." Indeed, Thompson reports that the "spread of misinformation is all over the place." Parents regularly send him articles from "Blaze.com, Tucker Carlson's website, or Alex Jones" as a guide for school policies and practices. Often the activist community members "don't realize they're spreading [misinformation]," according to Thompson. "They think they're right … and everyone else is wrong."

Thompson reports that a central thrust of a "fringe group of religious right" parents has been to accuse the school of teaching Critical Race Theory (or CRT). When he asked the parents to define CRT — whether they were talking about "the theoretical framework that originated in legal theory" or "what you heard on Fox News," they replied only: "We know you're doing it." The parents followed an anti-CRT "playbook" created by Manhattan Institute's Christopher Rufo and launched an investigation into the social studies curriculum. When they found no direct evidence of CRT in the official curriculum, they claimed the school was "teaching undercover CRT." With a weary smile, Thompson ironically comments: "I have so much time on my hands, I have time to generate conspiracy theories and then cover them up." The parent activists also demanded that several novels, including Toni Morrison's, *The Bluest Eye*, be excluded from English classes and removed from the school's library because they included descriptions of sex, gender orientation, and/or racism. Noting that Morrison "is revered

as one of the best authors of the last few decades," Thompson concludes: "They seem to be unaware of the fact that kids have access to pornography on their phones 24/7 … So it's kind of mind-boggling."

Principal Thompson worries that all this pressure from a small number of community members is affecting his staff and their ability to teach about difficult subject matter that is important for the development of democratic citizens. There is "so much heat on us right now from these parent groups that we're treading carefully. … We are trying to weather this storm and see if we can get through it." His staff "has become scared … worried that … if I talk about the Civil Rights Movement and Jim Crow, am I going to be accused of telling White people they are bad?" These concerns have affected teachers' willingness to address certain topics and have led some to consider retirement. Thompson explains: "I get it — why would you want to be under the microscope like that 24/7?" He also has changed some of his own leadership practices, never meeting with parents alone because "I assume I'm going to be accused of something I didn't do at some point."

Reflecting on what has happened in his school as the politics of education have "gotten that volatile and … toxic," Thompson shares his concern about the broader effects on public schools and democracy. "It makes me worry about where things are going in this country from a trajectory standpoint. And I'm wondering if I'm just in my own echo chamber or if it's happening elsewhere?"

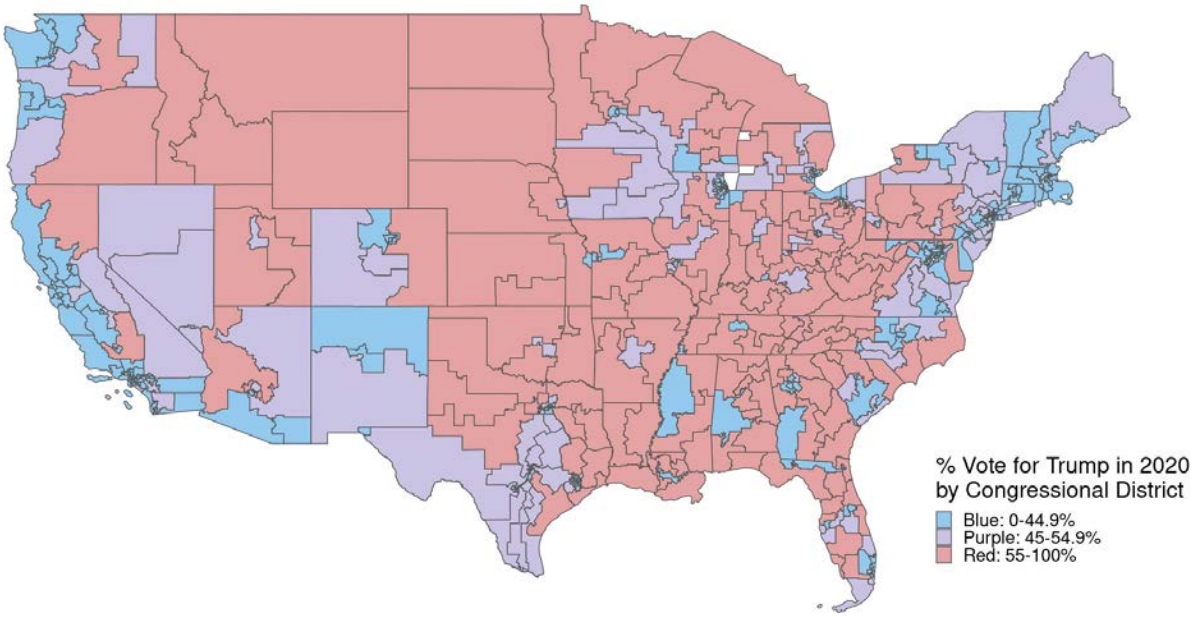
The study

It is happening elsewhere, and often. And it is happening most often, not in Red or Blue communities, but in schools located in politically contested Purple communities. That's the clear conclusion we come to after conducting an extensive study of educational leaders in summer 2022.

We surveyed a nationally representative sample of 682 public high school principals and interviewed a diverse set of 32 principals from Blue, Purple, and Red communities. Specifically, we categorized each of the high schools represented in our survey according to the 2020 presidential vote in that school's Congressional District. We use the shorthand "Blue" for high schools located in Congressional Districts where the vote for Donald Trump was less than 45%; "Purple" for high schools located in Congressional Districts where the vote was 45–54.9%; and "Red" for high schools located in Congressional Districts where the vote for Donald Trump was 55% or greater.

In our survey and interviews, we asked principals about political attacks targeting their schools, conflict between students, responses to the attacks and the conflict, efforts to prepare students for a diverse democracy, and more. Several of the survey questions are identical to questions we asked in a nationally representative survey of high school principals in summer 2018. In many instances, we are able to explore how school conditions have changed over time, and to do so across different partisan contexts. (For more details about the study and its methodology please refer to our Methodological Appendix.)

Blue, Purple, Red: 2020 US Presidential Vote by Congressional District



This study emerges in a period characterized by hyper-partisanship and growing threats to democratic norms and institutions. We are particularly interested in whether the partisan leanings of a community are impacting efforts to educate for democracy. We ask:

1. How widely felt are the highly politicized attacks on public schools? Are the prevalence of these attacks related to the partisan make-up of the communities surrounding particular public schools — whether the communities are Blue, Purple, or Red?

2. To what extent is this political conflict impacting the ways that public high schools across the United States educate students to participate in a diverse democracy? Does this differ by whether the schools are located in Blue, Purple, or Red communities?

Scholarship has demonstrated that the goal of preparing students to participate in a diverse democracy can be pursued both through a range of curricular opportunities and through efforts to create a school culture that reflects and reinforces democratic values and practices. For example, curricular practices such as informed and respectful discussion of controversial issues can support the development of democratic capacities and commitments and lessons designed to foster credibility assessments of online content have been found to be impactful. Relatedly, a school culture that values inclusion and respectful interaction among diverse groups and that provides opportunities for student voice can promote democratic values.[3]

As we consider efforts to fulfill these democratic aims of education, we focus particular attention on four ideals of a diverse democracy that our society is struggling with right now: 1) Engaging in respectful dialogue; 2) Using accurate information; 3) Including the stories, perspectives, and identities of those from diverse communities, and attending to race and racism in history and contemporary life; 4) Affirming the dignity of all members of the community.

We then identified school practices associated with these values. Specifically, we considered whether schools acted to support: a) Classroom discussions on controversial issues of public concern; b) Lessons on judging the credibility/accuracy of online

content; c) Lessons on the literature and history of diverse groups in American society, including lessons tied to contemporary and historical issues of race and racism; and d) A school culture that affirms the dignity of LGBTQ+ students.

We have intentionally picked priorities that are fundamentally important to a diverse democracy. For example, in a diverse democracy it is a safe assumption that people will disagree in regards to varied laws and policies and it is important that those who do disagree are treated with respect. In our survey, we ask whether "students have made demeaning or hateful remarks" when classmates expressed liberal or conservative views. This is something about which all those committed to a diverse democracy would be concerned. Similarly, we ask whether efforts have been made to limit harassment of LGBTQ+ youth and whether LGBTQ+ youth have been subject to "hostile or demeaning remarks" because there recently has been an increase in such dehumanizing assaults and diverse democratic communities must be grounded in universal respect.[4] Our survey items related to professional development also provide indicators of whether schools act to advance these ideals. We ask, for example, whether there has been professional development to help youth "judge the credibility/accuracy of information they find online" or to help youth learn "about the literature and history of people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds."

Such items enable us to assess, for instance, whether concern about the potential for conflict between students holding differing opinions is leading educators to learn how to manage such possible conflict or is it leading them to avoid such discussions altogether? Similarly, are teachers focusing on how best to teach the full history of our country, or are conflicts with parent groups (or fear of such conflicts) leading educators to avoid discussion of race and racism instead? Doubtless, there are varied ways to pursue these learning goals — so we have asked about attention to these topics but not about the particular way a topic is pursued. In short, our measures provide indicators of whether educators are enacting commitments to a diverse democracy. We also assess whether those commitments vary depending on the partisan context of the school.

Additionally, we selected these important practices because they are under attack at this moment by a virulent stream of hyper-partisan conflict. These attacks occur despite a strong research basis for their efficacy[5] and robust public support. For example, a recent national survey finds that over 95% of Americans want high school students to learn about slavery, and 85% want high school students to learn about racial inequality.[6] These practices are important indicators because they help prepare youth for life in a diverse democracy, the public is broadly supportive of them, and yet there is reason to fear that they may be subject to a chilling effect due to current political dynamics.

Plan for the report

The remainder of the report highlights findings from our study. Section 2 describes the ways that public schools, particularly those located in Purple communities, have increasingly become targets of political conflict. The next four sections explore whether and how political conflict is constraining efforts to educate for a diverse democracy. We assess the impact of conflict on promoting respectful dialogue (Section 3), supporting the use of quality information (Section 4), encouraging learning about race and racism (Section 5), and fostering a school climate that ensures everyone is treated with dignity (Section 6). In Section 7, we consider how principals, district leaders, community members, and students can stand up for the ideals of a diverse democracy. We conclude in Section 8 with a few thoughts on the need for deepening democratic engagement in order to sustain the democratic purposes of public education.

Public Schools Increasingly are Targets of Political Conflict

[I've been called a] "liberal communist" who is here to undermine American democracy and individual liberty, which isn't the case at all. The pandemic made people more vocal and angry about all the political things we're seeing across the country now. We went from having nobody at our board meetings to having 150 people pack in our board meetings during COVID because we were "killing their children" by requiring them to wear masks. We've had an individual come to our school board with a gun on his belt that we've had to have removed. There is a very vocal and politically organized group of parents/stakeholders with ultra-conservative views that want to remove discussions about race from the high school classroom, believe that LGBTQ+ rights should not be upheld in the school system, desire to have Christian prayer in schools, desire books related to race and LGBTQ+ topics to be removed from the curriculum and library. We're fighting the anti social emotional learning curriculum, anti comprehensive sex ed. One of the big pushes is [from] a group called Protect Nebraska Children — they are actually funded by a group out of Arizona [Family Watch International].[7]

GLENN JOHNSON, Principal of a Nebraska High School in a Red community

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.

ELAINE RUSSO, Principal of California High School in a Purple community

Hyper-partisanship and hostile political rhetoric at the national level have grown in the last few years, and there is evidence these dynamics have seeped into America's high schools. Nationally representative surveys we conducted of public high school teachers in 2017 and of public high school principals in 2018 highlight how contentious national politics influenced the ways that high school students communicated and interacted with one another — emboldening some to embrace racist or xenophobic stances or to attack classmates who hold different political views.[8]

More recently, there has been increasing political conflict targeting public schools themselves. A study we conducted with colleagues documented the emergence of a coordinated "conflict campaign" in spring and summer of 2021, aiming to galvanize and mobilize parents who were angry about COVID restrictions and, especially, diversity initiatives. Hostility was frequently directed at school boards, school district leadership, and public school educators. The "conflict campaign" took hold most often in Purple areas of the country.[9]

A central question in our new study is whether a similar pattern of conflict directed at public schools played out in the 2021–2022 school year.

More than two-thirds of public high school principals reported substantial political conflict tied to hot button issues during the 2021–2022 school year.

Our survey data make clear that political conflict over a set of hot button issues occurred at more than two-thirds (69%) of public schools across the nation during the 2021–2022 school year. Half of all principals report that parents or other community members sought to limit or challenge teaching and learning about issues of race and racism. Nearly half report challenges to school policies and practices related to LGBTQ+ student rights. A third of principals share that parents or community members raised challenges to school library books they deemed inappropriate. And a little more than a third of principals note that parents or community members have sought to limit or challenge Social Emotional Learning.

FIGURE 1. Principals reporting parents or other community members sought to limit or challenge:

Teaching and learning about issues of race and racism	50%
Policies and practices related to LGBTQ+ student rights	48%
Student access to particular books in the school library they deemed inappropriate	33%
Social Emotional Learning (or SEL)	39%

This was not business as usual. The conflicts are increasing. Almost half (45%) of principals reported that the amount of community level conflict during the 2021–2022 school year was "more" or "much more" than it had been prior to the pandemic. Three percent said there was less.

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It is important to note that principals leading schools in Purple communities were far more likely than their peers to report acute community level conflict. This pattern held for each area of conflict. Principals of schools in Purple communities were nearly twice as likely as principals in Red or Blue communities to report multiple incidents of community conflict related to LGBTQ+ student rights. Principals in Purple schools were more than 50% more likely than principals of schools in Red or Blue communities 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.

The heightened frequency of conflict in Purple communities likely reflects that these are settings in which large sectors of the public hold competing priorities. As we note above, outside groups have specifically targeted these communities through a "conflict campaign" to gain partisan advantage.[10]

Intensity of community level conflict, by partisan leaning

FIGURE 2. Principals reporting parents or other members of the school's community have sought to limit or challenge teaching and learning about issues of race and racism, by partisan context.

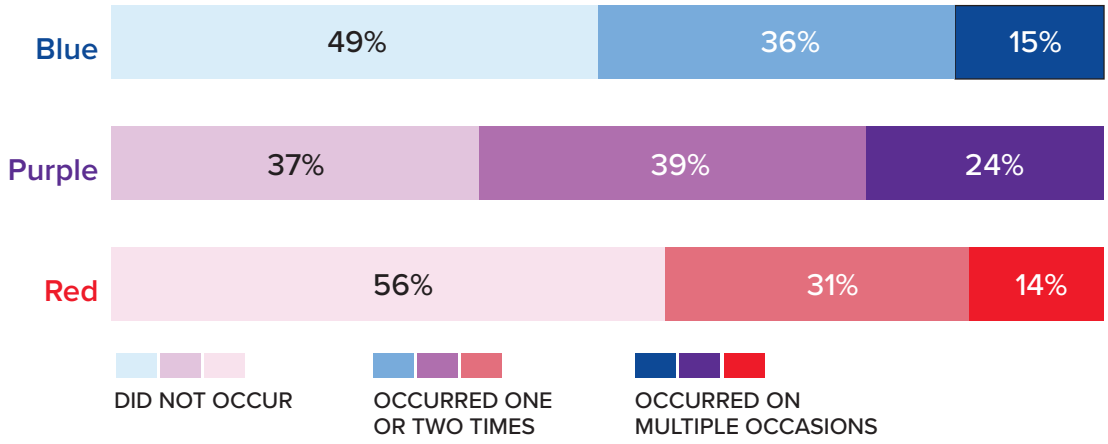


FIGURE 3. Principals reporting parents or other members of the school's community have sought to limit or challenge policies and practices the school has adopted related to LGBTQ+ student rights, by partisan context.

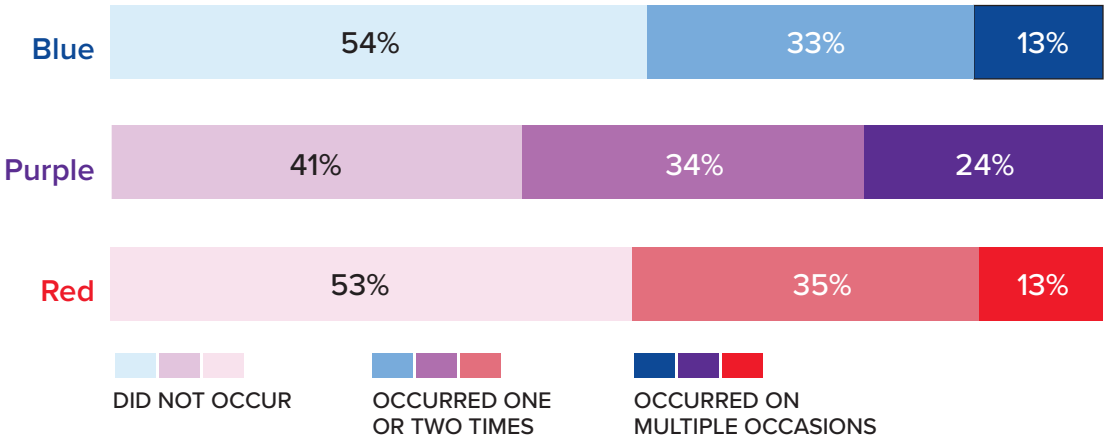


FIGURE 4. Principals reporting parents or other members of the school's community have sought to limit or challenge student access to particular books in the school library, by partisan context.

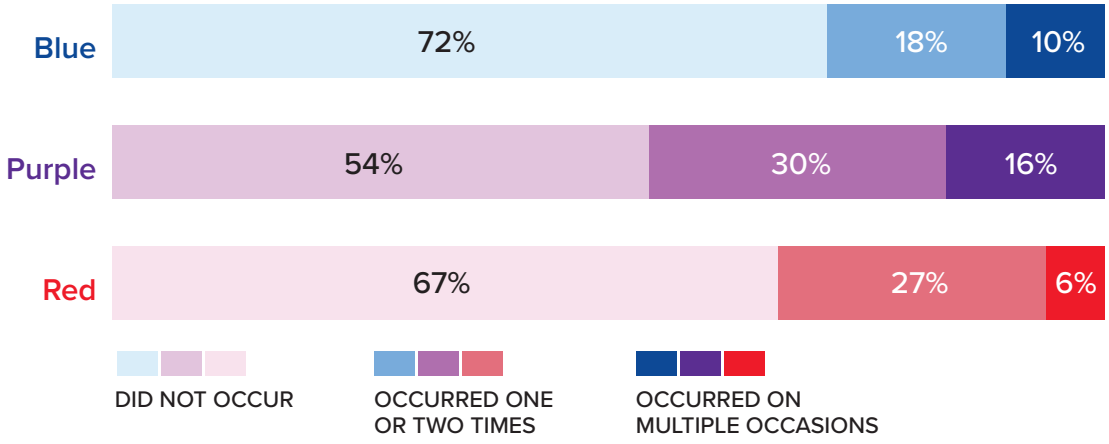
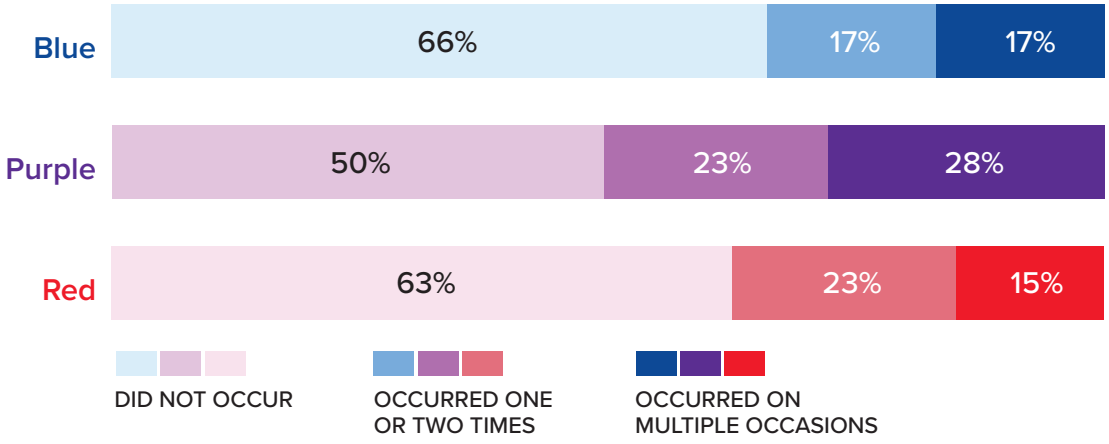


FIGURE 5. Principals reporting parents or other members of the school's community have sought to limit or challenge social emotional learning (or SEL), by partisan context.



To be sure, not all principals have faced political conflict. Melissa Freeman, who leads a high school in a Blue California community, has heard news stories about attacks on public schools in other parts of the country, but notes: "That is just so far away from this area of where I work." And principals such as Nathan Goodman from a school in a Red Mississippi community, explain that angry phone calls from parents about social issues — "three or four reached out and gave me a pretty good tongue lashing" — are nothing out of the ordinary.

But the majority of principals shared stories of political conflict, often highlighting the ways that the stress and isolation of the pandemic have led community members to feel and express greater dissatisfaction and anger. Lisa Decker, a principal in a Blue Wisconsin community recounts: "The thing about COVID that made it different is that everybody seemed to go from zero to 60 much faster, people were more upset right away." In David Myers' school in a Purple Arizona community, the stress of community

members “often manifests as uncivic behavior, uncivil behavior.” He notes: “You see it in how quickly people shift to a confrontational pose. You see it the way they drive. You see it in the way they take up an entire aisle in the grocery store.”

This same stress contributes to hostile interactions between community members and school officials. Scott West, who leads a school in a Purple community in Georgia, explains: “It seems like everyone right now is angry with the government. Schools and teachers in particular are the closest government agent that anyone will deal with, so that is the first opportunity for someone to vent their frustration.” Derek Stephenson, who leads a school in a Red community in Nebraska, points out parents across the ideological spectrum “have become more vocal” on an array of political issues. “Prior to COVID, I could have a conversation with any of these people and it would be civil and in the end we might agree to disagree. Now it is a time where if they don’t get what they want, they want to shout louder and take the issue to someone higher up.” Henry Curtis, the principal in a Purple community in Ohio, similarly shares: “People are more likely to aggressively tell you what they think … and are more vehement about them being right.”

Political conflict is often directed through organized campaigns

A number of principals spoke of organized parents and community members who have led campaigns against their school or district. Richard Golden, the principal of a California school in a Purple community relates: “We had an angry mob … that would come to every school board meeting and raise hell — like-minded folks who would come in and they had their orchestrated talking points, usually, reacting to things that weren’t actually happening.” Some principals, like Bob Iverson from a Red Nebraska community, view such efforts as part of a broader “political movement that is like wildfire spreading across our country.” And several principals described connections between parents in their communities and national organizations, such as “Moms for Liberty,” a conservative non-profit organization that was founded in January 2021 to combat masking policies, curriculum on race, and school policies related to LGBTQ+ rights.

Most principals experiencing political conflict attribute their challenges to a relatively small group of parents and community members who, in the words of Principal Derek Stephenson in a school in Nebraska, “feel empowered to push their will on everyone else.” North Carolina Principal Mary Beth Schmidt describes “small clusters of hate” who “prey upon the fears of uneducated and uninformed people to push their own agendas.” Several principals contrast those parents “who speak the loudest,” with what Colorado principal Michael Manning in a Purple community describes as “the silent majority,” the “90% of my school and community [who] are amazing and extremely supportive, but … [who] do not go and speak at board meetings.” The “vocal minority” is willing — in the words of Michigan’s Katy Ford — to “rock the mic” at board meetings. At times, such loud voices exert influence through veiled threats. For example, Principal Alicia Gonzalez describes a parent in a Red California community who was frustrated with district masking policies and who “walked up to the board and said, ‘We’re coming for you.’”

Political conflict has made the difficult work of public education more difficult

All this political conflict has had a substantial negative effect on the work of public schools. In Utah, principal Bill Anderson has seen a "growing divide … pretty much down political lines." This division, he reports, "is making it more difficult to manage a school community — more than any other era in my 20 years of administrative experience." In part, the political conflict represents a distraction from the core work of supporting learning and development. "I receive more questions about masks, CRT, and library books than questions about students' wellbeing," notes Michigan principal Sam Strong. Conflict also erodes shared understandings and commitments that are so important to the complex work of public schools. Principal Steven Workman from Minnesota argues that we need "strong partnerships between schools and parents on behalf of student learning and development." Yet, he adds: "The current political climate has increased distrust, or decreased trust, with public schools and public educators in our community."

Political conflict has exacerbated a pivotal challenge confronting many public schools today — supporting students' mental health in a period of heightened stress and anxiety. Principal Alfred Stevens, who leads a school in a Purple Pennsylvania community, recounts that when his students came back to campus in fall 2021, they were "just not used to … how to deal with conflict in the real time." As "mental health and anxiety and things have ratcheted up," notes Amber Reynolds in a Purple Iowa community, "political polarization has not helped that matter at all." Principal Alan Chavez, from a Red community in Missouri, frames this point more bluntly: "The volatility and anger that is displayed daily on social media, television and by our elected officials is damaging our young peoples' mental health."

The climate of conflict swirling around schools also is having a negative effect on school staff. Principal Nancy Peters in Tennessee shares that she has seen "a lot of faculty stress" associated with the "awful ugly" emails parents send to teachers related to culturally divisive issues. In Nebraska, Principal Glenn Johnson notes that the fact that some parents "have been more vocal in espousing conspiracy theories peddled by unreliable news media … has made working conditions more difficult for teachers, and may ultimately make it incredibly difficult to find teachers to come to our rural area." Echoing this concern, Principal Ted McCarty in Massachusetts reports that "hostility toward schools and teachers has drastically increased the challenge to find and retain teachers."

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. Noting that principals "have been beat up emotionally by parents, blamed for all of the ills of society," California Principal Susan Fish adds: "Something needs to change or else we will all quit." In Nevada, Principal Randy Heckman similarly concludes: "It's been rough as hell. I mean, it's been bad. I know I'm not the only one who is counting days now until retirement, and I'm getting closer."

The political attacks on public schools have heightened conflict and created new challenges for educators. In the next sections, we take up the question of whether and to what extent these attacks have impacted the efforts of schools to educate for a diverse democracy.

Political Conflict Undermines the Practice of Respectful Dialogue

The current climate in the US has allowed those with views on the fringe of political and social norms to feel confident in making more bold and out loud statements. It was definitely the removal of the filter that many people had when they were on news or in interviews — that allowed our kids to feel that high school kids could remove their filter. And so we had a lot more bashing of other people's ideas without feeling it was wrong, a lot more getting personal with an attack instead of [focusing on] what you're discussing in the classroom. And that's because that's the environment that they saw on the news or their parents saw and then talked about in front of them.

ERIC LUCAS, Principal in a Purple community in Illinois

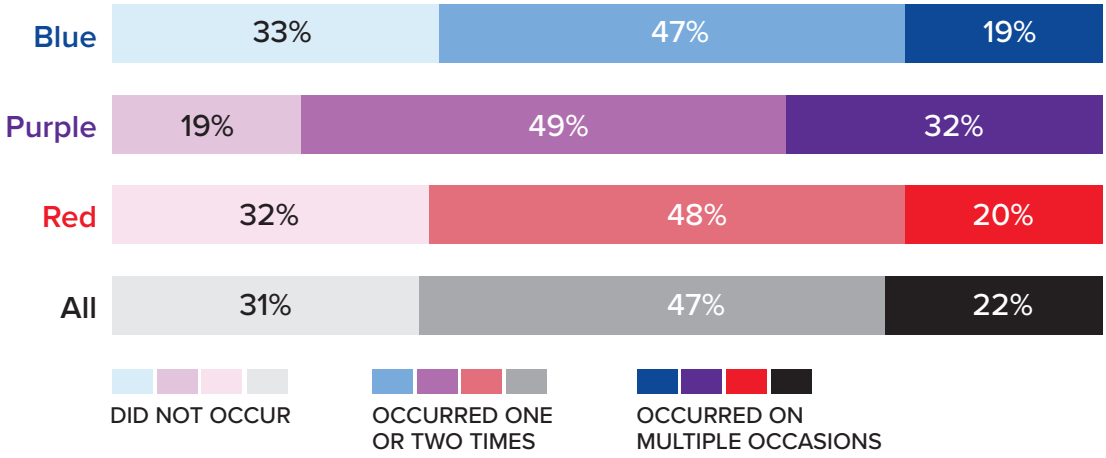
I am very concerned about the future of our country and our schools. The divisiveness, and the community members that stir that, make me concerned for the future of truth and unbiased, intellectual studies at school. [Our teachers] are just so overwhelmed and anxious about being able to teach and not be accosted by a student or a community member for what they're teaching. And so it's just a more hostile environment for a lot of them. I had some kids that were screaming at each other in classes and I'd have 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. And so we had to bring it out where it's like, "Okay, we can't do any of our current event topics. We're going to ixnay all of that." We're going to just do this with past things like, okay, "Should the atomic bomb have been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Let's look at the pro and the con." And so we've had to ratchet it back from contemporary events and do some things like that.

AMBER REYNOLDS, Principal in a Purple community in Iowa

Across the nation, the vast majority of principals report that political conflict is playing out in their schools' hallways and classrooms. Scott Dennis, the principal in a Purple Pennsylvania community explains that "the climate is tough right now in schools" because "there is little compromise in political ideologies." In a Blue community in Wisconsin, Kathy Hayes has "noticed … the increasing incivility among students falling along partisan lines." They are "more edgy about political and social issues." This edginess often manifests as hostility. "*Ad hominem* attacks," notes Principal Lonnie Lender from a Blue community in Minnesota, "are more frequent when speaking in opposition to one another's ideas." Hilda Christie, a veteran principal from a Red community in Tennessee, adds: "There's a level of intolerance and refusal to understand the other side that I haven't seen before the pandemic."

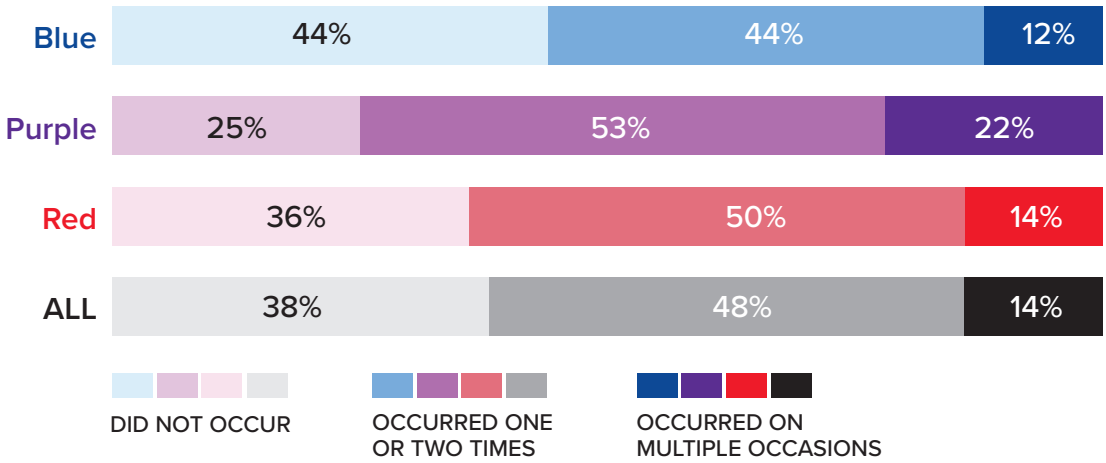
Almost seven of ten (69%) principals report that "students have made demeaning or hateful remarks towards classmates for expressing either liberal or conservative views." Schools located in Purple communities are far more likely than in Blue or Red communities to report that this is an acute problem — that it has occurred multiple times.

FIGURE 6. Principals reporting students have made demeaning or hateful remarks toward classmates for expressing either liberal or conservative views, by partisan context.



Further, more than six in ten principals (62%) report differences of political opinion among students made for contentious classroom environments. One in seven principals indicate that this problem has occurred multiple times. Again, principals leading schools in Purple communities are far more impacted than principals in Blue or Red communities.

FIGURE 7. Principals reporting strong differences of political opinion among students have created more contentious classroom environments, by partisan context.



Principals leading schools where students engaged in the most political conflict were the least likely to address it

A smaller proportion of principals in Purple communities than in Blue or Red communities indicated strong agreement with the statement: "I took action to draw attention to the importance of ensuring that students with differing political perspectives are heard and treated with respect." Principals from Purple communities were also more likely than other principals to disagree with that statement.

FIGURE 8. Principals reporting they took action to draw attention to the importance of ensuring that students with differing political perspectives are heard and treated with respect, by partisan context.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Blue	1%	3%	51%	45%
Purple	1%	9%	62%	28%
Red	0%	7%	58%	35%
All	1%	6%	57%	36%

Importantly, teachers in schools most impacted by increasing levels of conflict are the ones who are least likely to get support. Specifically, principals leading schools in Blue communities (49%) were far more likely than those in Purple (33%) and Red communities (27%) to report that their teachers received professional development to support their efforts to conduct productive conversations on controversial issues. Despite experiencing the largest increases in conflict, schools in Purple communities decreased their support for teachers to manage that conflict effectively.

It is also interesting to note that when we surveyed principals in 2018, principals in Purple communities were more likely than those in Blue or Red communities to report their teachers received support for teaching about controversial issues. By 2022 however, support had dropped by 13% in Red communities and by 21% in Purple communities, and had increased by 4% in Blue communities. It appears that retreat from this core educational practice is a relatively recent phenomenon, and one that may well reflect changes in the political pressure that school leaders face in particular partisan contexts.

FIGURE 9. 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%

Such an interpretation is consistent with what we heard from many principals. For example, Todd Ricci, the principal in a Purple Connecticut community told us: “The current environment is challenging, and more than ever in my seven years as a principal, I feel like we are often walking on eggshells. The job of promoting deep intellectual thought and confronting information that students might not agree with is becoming harder and harder.” Similarly, Tony Romano, from a Purple community in California notes: “In my heart, I would love for my history teachers to talk about politics, elections, and current events, but unfortunately my parents cannot handle it, so I indicated that it’s not appropriate for them to teach these subjects in class. This is not me or my admin team being afraid of conflict. We are taking a pragmatic approach so that our school can function with as little disruption as possible and hopefully without

violence." Relatedly, in an Oregon community principal Bruce Donahue describes as "on the Blue side of Purple," there was a chilling effect when parents expressed concerns about "too much woke ideology" and classroom discussion that "makes kids uncomfortable." Donahue concludes: "It doesn't take very much of that, of an incident that's political in nature, to really have an impact on the school."

"In my heart, I would love for my history teachers to talk about politics, elections, and current events, but unfortunately my parents cannot handle it, so I indicated that it's not appropriate for them to teach these subjects in class. This is not me or my admin team being afraid of conflict. We are taking a pragmatic approach so that our school can function with as little disruption as possible and hopefully without violence."

The sharp decline in support for discussion of current controversial issues and principals' reports of teachers moving away from engaging their students in such discussions is cause for alarm. The capacity to have such high quality discussions is a central building block for a diverse democratic society.[11] There is also substantial evidence that classrooms where students are able to learn about and discuss their differing perspectives on issues promote students' interest in the topic, capacities for informed deliberation across difference, knowledge of the principles of democracy, and commitment to engage civically and politically in society.[12] It is also worth noting that a substantial and bipartisan majority of adults in the US (more than 80%) believe that controversial issues such as immigration, the second amendment, and income inequality should be discussed in high schools.[13] To be sure, creating an open context for informed deliberation can be difficult[14] and those challenges are clearly likely to increase in schools and communities rife with harsh partisan divisions. The fact that high schools in Purple and Red communities are providing less support for these practices at precisely the time when they are needed the most highlights a significant cost of the partisan conflict engulfing so many schools. It also signals the need, as we discuss below, for educators and community members to push back and support such practices.

Conflict Makes it Harder to Address Misinformation

Do you remember the days when liberals and conservatives were all moderates to a degree? That is no longer the case. Our moderate conservative folks around here have gone to the extreme. I'm a registered Republican. I don't think I would've gotten this job if I wasn't at the time. And I've been here years as the principal. Nowadays, I can't even relate to most of the constituents out there. They're just crazy. We had a group of parents that went bananas on us on the masking, and believed that we were encouraging kids to get a shot that surely had a microchip in it because the government wanted to control their brains, and all the rest of that crap. It's like they're in a trance. It's been hard on the kids because we have teachers now that are terrified to bring up anything about current events. We have teachers who used to use newspapers in the classroom. You can't do that anymore. You can't use CNN because the parents will go nuts on you. You can't use Fox because it's so out there. It's hard to teach kids about what's going on in any kind of context, because there is no context anymore.

RANDY HECKMAN, Principal in a Red School in Nevada

While American public schools have long been tasked with helping young people to identify and use high quality information, the dramatic expansion of information sources and the degree to which many sources are tied to partisan perspectives has made this work more difficult. Principal Sam Strong from a Purple community in Michigan notes: "There is so much information at everyone's fingertips, that it has made it hard for parents and students to decide what is real and what is fake." It is particularly challenging for educators to guide students to use information wisely when there is not agreement about what constitutes legitimate information. And, as Principal Strong adds: "COVID has made this much worse." Amidst the uncertainties and stress of the pandemic, rumors, half-truths, and lies have been spread widely through social media. In many communities, schools have become targets of such misinformation. "Parents and community members have gotten to the point where they think they can say/post whatever they want on these sites and often refuse to see any middle ground," reports Principal Elvis Levering who leads a Blue school in New Jersey.

Schools in purple communities faced far more pressure from parents regarding the information or media sources that teachers used

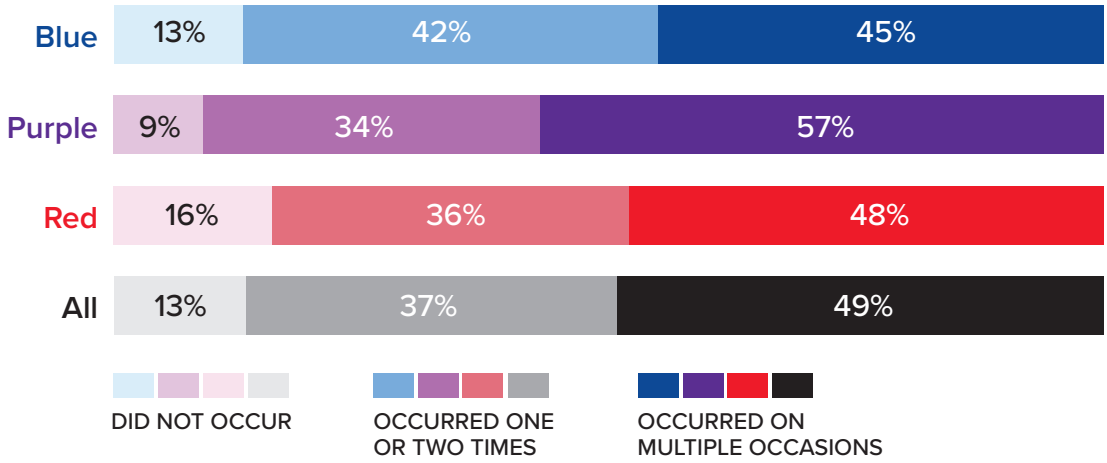
Our survey finds that battles over information were commonplace in American public high schools in the 2021–2022 school year. Almost two-thirds (64%) of principals report that parents or community members have challenged the information or media sources used by teachers in their school. This problem has been experienced most and most acutely in Purple communities. More than a third (35%) of principals in Purple communities report it occurred three or more times — a far higher percentage than in Blue or Red communities. It is also striking that this heightened community-based contention over information grew almost three-fold in Purple communities between 2018 and 2022 (from 12% to 35%).

FIGURE 10. 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%

In addition, more than half of all principals (60%) reported that 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.

FIGURE 11. Principals reporting students have made unfounded claims in class based on unreliable media sources, by partisan context.



The growth of these problems is not surprising. Political polarization and conflict both promote engagement with and distribution of misinformation and this, in turn, often makes the problems of political polarization and conflict still worse.[15] If educational efforts are to address this polarization and conflict and enable youth to participate in productive forms of democratic deliberation, it is of paramount importance that public schools better prepare students to judge the accuracy of information. Fortunately, studies find that educators can help students learn how to judge the credibility of online content, though much more work in this area is needed.[16]

However, professional development for teachers aimed at helping students better judge the credibility of online content is still not consistently provided, and it is provided less in Purple and Red communities than in Blue communities. Sixty-six percent of principals in Blue communities reported that at least some teachers in their schools received such professional development, compared with 55% of principals in Red communities and 54% of principals in Purple communities. This uneven pattern of professional development represents a missed opportunity for *all* schools to strengthen students' capacities for thoughtful democratic engagement.

Nebraska principal Glenn Johnson, who we introduce earlier, speaks to the value of professional development on assessing the credibility of online sources. He has received "a lot of pushback from some parents … who like Infowars or like those types of sensationalized news sources." So, Principal Johnson has worked with his staff on a process for helping students analyze the bias in different media sources. "We use university fact check sources. Our kids are taught … [to use] reputable news sources — they have to fall [within] one [standard] deviation to the left or the right" and demonstrate "very low political influence if you are going to use them in a paper." He adds: "I'm pretty passionate about [the process] as … 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."

Conflict Leads to Declines in Support for Teaching about Race, Racism, and Racial and Ethnic Diversity

[Last year] I became the principal in ___ Minnesota. I went there and I loved the kids. I loved the teachers. I loved my experience, but I ended up disagreeing with much of the superintendent's way of doing things. I value diversity and teaching [and] learning about diversity. While I didn't think I was going to go there and — bam — dive into all of this, I thought I could at least start to touch on it, because it's a very white community and their students of color struggle a lot. 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." The year before I got there, the English teacher who taught the class [which includes] material about diversity had gotten in some hot water. I don't know how, but it was labeled Critical Race Theory — it was a big deal. That was what prompted him telling me, "Don't do this. You can't do this." We had a principal meeting every week that was just the principals, and then we had an admin meeting every week. And at no time do I recall, in either of those meetings, ever talking about: "What don't we understand about people from other backgrounds and cultures?" And the directive was, "Don't bring that up. We're not ready to talk about that."

DENISE BALL, Principal in a Red Community in Minnesota

We've got a group in the community that call themselves, "Moms for Liberty." Two of them are my parents. One of them came in and said, "I want to see the curriculum where you're talking about Critical Race Theory." I'm like, "Ma'am, do your research. Critical Race Theory by and large is taught at the university level." The words "critical race theory" have not been uttered in most high schools until the Republicans tried to say they were. In the sake of full disclosure, I'm a registered Republican. I'm a fiscal conservative. So, I'm talking about the people that I claim to vote with. But, it's not there. I really firmly believe you would find [in] most high schools, critical race theory was not in a required course to any real extent, that it was a flash card created by a group with an agenda.

ROD JACOBS, Principal in a Red Community in Kentucky

For young people to participate meaningfully in a diverse democracy, it is essential that they are able to join with others from different backgrounds to identify shared problems, build complex alliances, and take action for the common good. This is challenging work that requires they are familiar with the full story of our nation's history. That story embodies diverse experiences and cultures. It proceeds from the acknowledgement that race and racism have shaped and continue to shape American life. Young people need exposure to inspiring examples of groups working on their own and in coalitions to address these problems as well as exposure to ways that racist structures and practices too frequently have prevented or limited such efforts and diminished the life chances of fellow Americans. But, more than exposure, young people need opportunities to talk with one another about how, in light of these stories, they can move forward to forge a more promising future. Public schools are uniquely positioned to support such learning.

The capacity of public schools to play this role is increasingly under assault, particularly in Purple and Red communities. As we noted earlier in this report, nearly half (48%) of all principals, and nearly 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."

Much of the public pushback on teaching about race has centered on Critical Race Theory (or CRT). CRT is an academic field of study primarily taught in law school and graduate studies that explores the ways that racism is embedded within the law, public policy, and various social institutions. As Kentucky Principal Rod Jacobs notes, it has not been a common topic of study in America's high schools. Attacks on CRT in public schools arose in 2021 as part of a concerted and purposeful campaign, initiated and supported by right wing foundations and think tanks, to foment cultural division for the purpose of partisan gain. This "conflict campaign" has been propelled by massive coverage in conservative media, the widespread distribution of advocacy toolkits from coordinated networks of nonprofits and legal organizations, and the cascading energy from hundreds of legislative battles in states and school boards.[17] Explaining the campaign against CRT in spring 2021, Steve Bannon noted, "Hey, this is how we are going to win … 50 seats in 2022."[18]

Many principals highlight the ways that this "conflict campaign" has upended work at their school and made it much harder to support young people's learning. "There's been mass hysteria about the CRT," reports Hilda Christie who leads a school in a Red community in Tennessee. Community members associated with the group "Moms for Liberty" have encouraged parents to think "that our teachers are indoctrinating kids" or "breaking this [Tennessee] law … [by] teaching diverse perspectives." And while few schools were teaching CRT, we saw clear signs in our survey and interviews that these pressures led to a chilling effect — in the form of pressure to avoid discussing race and racism in general. In Principal Amber Reynolds's Purple community in Iowa, parents have asked the school to remove books that explore issues of race such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*. They also complained when a teacher showed clips from the film, *Hidden Figures*, which highlights the contributions of African American women to NASA's early spaceflight, because it includes a scene in which the main characters are forced to go to a separate building to use the bathroom.

Principal Glenn Johnson from Nebraska views these attacks as an effort to advance a mythological vision of America, rather than a more complex and historically accurate portrait of the past. "They want to see American exceptionalism. They want to see the idea from our founding fathers, that they were all good, perfect men, not the fact that Thomas Jefferson owned slaves. George Washington promised [to] release his slaves, and then didn't. Those are things that we talk about in history that they are very uncomfortable with, and don't really like, and want us to just go back to what they see as the good old days of 1950 schooling."

Community-level pressure aimed at restricting teaching and learning about race has influenced district and school leadership, and this plays out differently across partisan contexts. Almost a quarter (23%) of principals in Purple communities 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 far more than in Blue communities (8%). Conversely Principals in Blue communities are much more likely than principals in Purple or Red communities to report that their school board or district leadership acted to *promote* such teaching and learning.

"Almost a quarter (23%) of principals in Purple communities 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 far more than in Blue communities (8%). "

FIGURE 12. Principals reporting school board or district leadership has acted to "promote," "neither" promote nor limit, or "limit" teaching and learning about issues of race and racism, by partisan context.

	Promote	Neither	Limit
Blue	70%	22%	8%
Purple	38%	39%	23%
Red	27%	56%	17%
All	45%	40%	15%

In a similar way, principals in Blue communities are far more likely than principals in Red or Purple communities to "strongly agree" that they have taken action to support students to learn about race and racism.

FIGURE 13. Principals reporting that, in the past year, they took action to draw attention to the importance of supporting students to learn about race and racism, by partisan context.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Blue	1%	7%	45%	47%
Purple	1%	21%	54%	24%
Red	0%	18%	55%	27%
All	1%	14%	51%	34%

Partisan context is also strongly related to whether schools or school districts provided professional development for teachers interested in supporting students to learn about the literature and history of varied groups. Sixty-four percent of schools in Blue communities offered such training, compared with 44% of schools in Purple communities, and only 33% of schools in Red communities. It is important to note that these sizable gaps have appeared recently. Our survey in 2018 found that provision of this kind of professional development was quite equitably distributed across partisan contexts. While support for such professional development remained consistent in Blue communities over the past four years, it has dropped substantially in both Purple and Red communities. Indeed, though such support for education that attends to diversity was roughly equal in Red and Blue communities in 2018, by 2022, Blue communities were almost twice as likely to offer such support. This decline in professional development seems to be the direct result of heightened community-based attacks on teaching and learning about race.

Steep decline in support for teachers to educate about the literature and history of people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds among schools in red and purple communities

FIGURE 14. 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%

It is hard work to lead high quality lessons on sensitive and often painful topics in American history and contemporary life, particularly when students come to these lessons with different cultural experiences, histories, and political stances. Ideally, teachers are provided with training and encouragement from district and civic leaders to lean into this work with skills and commitment. The lagging support in Purple and Red communities for teaching about diversity and the history of racism means that many young people will be less prepared to participate in an informed and thoughtful way in our multiracial society.

Principals Report Sizable Growth in Harassment of LGBTQ+ Youth. The Highest Rates of Harassment and Disrespect Occur in Purple Communities.

It has been incredibly difficult getting through the pandemic. My teachers, administrators, and nurses came to me on a weekly basis in tears because parents are shouting and cursing at them for doing their jobs and what we are required to do by law. We had our first transgender students coming out publicly this year and we needed a transgender nondiscrimination policy. People on my admin team told me not to put the policy on our board agenda because it would be another divisive topic during a particularly difficult year, but I knew it was something we had to have and moved forward. Many parents spoke angrily at the board meetings and parent meetings, stating "it is immoral" and "students should not be allowed to use the bathroom" based on the sex that they identify with. Some families disenrolled their children to homeschool them. My board declined to pass the policy for six months. 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.

TONY ROMANO, Principal in a Purple California community

I live in rural Virginia — very much a conservative area. For Homecoming, we decided to do Royalty/Representatives rather than King and Queen, and the two seniors with the most votes would win, regardless of gender. Two young men (heterosexuals who were best friends, had girlfriends and actively campaigned to win together) won. It did not go well. A school board member even told me this was a Christian area — mind you, this was done to be more inclusive overall and simply choose the two best representatives of the school. All some adults could see was that we had "two kings" and it somehow implied we were promoting a gay couple. Aside from a few [students], the student body embraced the idea and defended their choice.

AMY WARNER, Principal in a Red Virginia community

Participation in a diverse democracy requires that everyone is treated with dignity and respect. Public schools need to be places where all members of the community are made to feel that they belong and where they experience care and mutual regard.

Unfortunately, there are signs that intolerance of LGBTQ+ youth has been increasing, particularly in Purple communities. As we note above, 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. Principals in Purple communities were nearly twice as likely (24% to 13%) as those in Red or Blue communities to indicate that such attacks occurred multiple times. Relatedly, principals in Purple communities were more likely (32% to 22%) than principals in Red or Blue communities to report multiple incidents of students making hostile or demeaning remarks toward LGBTQ+ classmates. The percentage of principals indicating that there had been 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.

"The percentage of principals indicating that there had been 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."

FIGURE 15. 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%

Amidst this heightened level of hostility, educational and civic leaders have spoken out about the importance of respecting LGBTQ+ students' rights and well-being. But, such action has been uneven across partisan context. Two-thirds (67%) of school board and district leaders in Blue communities made statements or acted to promote policies and practices that protected LGBTQ+ student rights. By comparison, less than half (45%) of school board and district leaders in Purple communities and less than one-third (29%) in Red communities did the same. Principals in Blue communities were also more likely than those in Purple or Red communities to strongly agree that they had drawn attention to the importance of supporting students who identify as LGBTQ+.

FIGURE 16. Principals reporting that their school board or district leadership made statements or acted to promote policies and practices related to protecting LGBTQ+ student rights, by partisan context

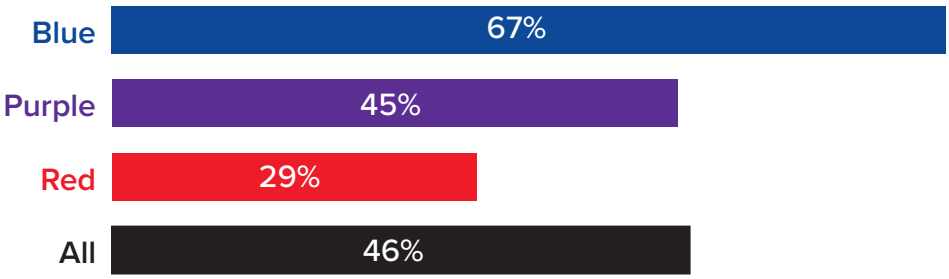
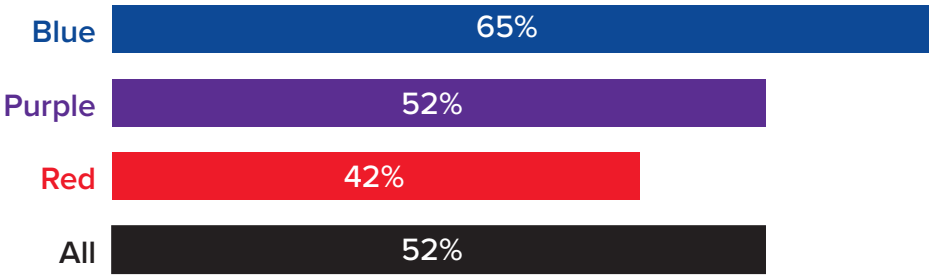


FIGURE 17. Principals strongly agreeing that they took action to draw attention to the importance of supporting students who identify as LGBTQ+, by partisan context.



The costs of partisan-driven conflict are clear. 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.

Standing up for a Diverse Democracy in 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. Students today are influenced by social media. This dynamic has led to less inclusive thinking in a minority of students. However, 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.

STUART HOLLOWAY, Principal in a Red Texas Community

We've got to talk about both sides of it — why people believe certain things — and let people that disagree share their opinion and feel respected about what their opinion is. We want to hear it. So there is a free and open dialogue going on in a classroom. I think that's what it's really about. When I was in a classroom as a teacher, that's what I wanted — every kid to feel safe and respected. I want to know our teachers are doing the same thing, making sure that kids, even if they're completely on the opposite end of where they may stand, feel like there's truly open dialogue, feel respected in sharing their opinion. Even if it's: "Hey, we don't believe Biden is the fairly elected president." "Okay. Well tell me why not? What's that about? Because we really want to understand that." I would say to [teachers] that every kid [should] feel included and cared about. And because of that, they want to be involved in the school. They want to be a part of it. They've got to truly feel like it's a place that they can feel vulnerable and open and honest. And, in turn, they're going to feel safe because no one's going to do something mean or derogatory to them.

ERIC JASPER, Principal in a Red Michigan Community

In the sections above, we have documented ways that political conflict, directed toward public schools, has led educators in Purple and Red communities to retreat from supporting practices associated with educating toward a diverse democracy. For example, over the last four years, the provision of professional development tied to controversial issue discussion dropped from 54% to 33% in Purple communities and from 40% to 27% in Red communities, while actually rising by 4% (from 45% to 49%) in Blue communities. Similarly, provision of professional development on ways to teach about the literature and history of people from different racial and ethnic groups dropped from 54% to 44% in Purple communities and dropped from 60% to 33% in Red communities. In Blue communities, the provision of this kind of professional development rose by 1% from 62% to 63%. Unfortunately, when many leaders in Purple and Red communities were faced with the conflict and pressures described in this report, rather than providing professional development or other supports to help teachers respond in this challenging context, many instead tried to avoid the issue.

"When many leaders in Purple and Red communities were faced with the conflict and pressures described in this report, rather than providing professional development or other supports to help teachers respond in this challenging context, many instead tried to avoid the issue."

The conflict directed toward public schools that is driving these declines often has been advanced through anti-democratic tactics. Small groups of activist parents and community members have wielded hostile and violent rhetoric, spread misinformation, suppressed lessons and curricular material, and denigrated vulnerable populations. The fact that principals all across the country reported such practices is not a coincidence. Since early 2021, a national network of conservative advocacy organizations and conservative media has enabled a campaign aimed at challenging how local public schools address the pandemic and support diversity, equity, and inclusion. Parents and community members in many locations have tapped into this "conflict campaign" and drawn ideas on how to heighten conflict from advocacy toolkits and stories carried through national media.[19]

Given these dynamics, it is hardly surprising that, on average, principals in challenging contexts did less to support education for a diverse democracy than those in less challenging contexts. Principals were facing significant pressure. And, in fact, many principals in very challenging contexts stood up for democracy nonetheless.

Our study highlights the variance in how principals have navigated their surrounding political context in light of the goal of fostering a diverse democracy. Some principals, primarily from deep Blue communities, reported little or no political pushback from parents and community members. While not all of these principals have taken action to support education for a diverse democracy, their choices were generally not conditioned by concerns with awakening community discontent. A small group of principals from deep Red communities rejected the goal of educating for a diverse democracy, expressing sympathy with parent and community activists that are critiquing teaching about race and racism because it might make some students uncomfortable, or school policies that support LGBTQ+ rights.

A much larger group of principals from across partisan contexts recounted how their commitments to supporting a diverse democracy have been constrained by political pressures. Principals have talked about "walking on eggshells" or "taking a pragmatic approach" by encouraging teachers to avoid discussion of controversial issues so that their school "can function with as little disruption as possible and hopefully without violence." A number of these principals expressed their personal desire to support robust student dialogue and lessons on race, even as they acknowledged that political attacks are having "an impact on the school." At times, this led principals to send mixed messages to teachers or otherwise signal that efforts to educate for a diverse democracy need to account for potential backlash.

Challenges for principals standing up for democracy without broad community support: The Case of Randy Heckman from a Red Nevada Community

We had an English teacher who asked kids to write a persuasive essay on whether or not kids should be required to wear masks. A board member who happens to have a daughter in this class, came to my office. He was angry. He came in boiling [saying:] "How dare you? That is something that needs to be done at home. It does not belong in school." And I told him, "Listen, if we can't do this, we can't teach kids how to critically think. We can't teach kids how to discern public debate, and how it meshes with their own values. You're cutting us off at the knees here, bud. You have to allow us the latitude to let kids think critically. And if you take that away, we're never going to heal this country and their polarization. We're just not. You have to be able to not just hold a view and defend it, but you have to understand someone else's point of view too. You don't have to agree with it, but you have to be able to process it. Or you'll never meet in the middle. You'll never have a united nation again."

[Later] I had a conversation with the teacher and said, "Come on. What are you thinking? You can't think of another topic? Really? Cause you know you're going to get in trouble. Listen, please, next time just find something a little less controversial. There are other topics you could have chosen to write a persuasive essay. And you're right. The kids have to feel passionately about it in order to engage in it to the degree that you want them to. But please try to find something else."

Principal Randy Heckman told us that he stood up to the school board member because he believes thinking critically about a wide range of ideas is "a skill these kids need desperately." He is willing to spend political capital to make this point. But he also is realistic about the threat of backlash in a community where many believe that the school is "indoctrinating students." Heckman concluded: "We just are going to get in trouble every single time we're even perceived as directing kids how to think."

Given the widespread political attacks on public schools, it is notable that many principals energetically advocated educating for a diverse democracy.

Promoting Respectful Discussion. A number of school leaders, across Blue, Purple, and Red communities, expressed a strong commitment to supporting students to discuss controversial issues in a respectful and informed manner. "We can disagree but still coexist, we can disagree and still learn from each other," argued Principal Alfred Stevens in Pennsylvania. In Michigan, Principal Katy Ford added, "All students have a voice that is valued and appreciated here — we want our students to be able to be in spaces where they can dissent."

Using Accurate Information. Many principals also shared concerns about students (and parents) relying on misinformation and some spoke about the value of curriculum and instruction that enables students, in the words of North Carolina principal Brian Fry, to "differentiate between reality and fantasy land." Fry talked about the "responsibility" of public schools "to create learning situations for our students so they can make educated, democratic decisions on their own." This need, he continued, makes it "important for students to learn … to research facts and gain information they need to become an informed citizen."

Learning to Talk about Race and Racism. Some principals spoke with us about the importance of public schools addressing issues of race and racism, even when this stance was not popular. Principal Lisa Decker in Wisconsin reasons that through discussions about racism, her school is "modeling ways to have conversations about things that make you uncomfortable." She adds: "We're also showing people how to bring their best selves to situations where things are a little uncomfortable. So in the end, what we're doing is creating a better society, better citizens." That she has continued this work, despite being sued (unsuccessfully) multiple times by conservative advocacy organizations, is testament to her commitment.

Treating All Students With Dignity. Several principals spoke of efforts to ensure that LGBTQ+ students are treated with respect. In some Purple and Red contexts, principals encountered resistance to this message from teachers as well as conservative activists in the broader community. Amber Reynolds in Iowa has spoken publicly at her school board meetings about why classroom doors in her school feature a rainbow sign that says, "All are welcome here." When teachers have challenged this policy or refused to use students' preferred pronouns, Reynolds has told them: "Okay. No, that's not how it works here. So either you're going to get on board that we welcome everybody, or you're going to have to find your joy elsewhere. And if that means I need to help you find a job elsewhere, I'm happy to do that. … You are not on the right path in education, if you are going to discriminate against a kid for any reason."

Who is standing up for a diverse democracy?

Across partisan contexts, some principals are standing up for the ideals of a diverse democracy. In an effort to better understand what leads principals to work to educate for a diverse democracy, even when faced with parent and community pressure, we included questions in the survey about the principals' civic and political commitments. We asked principals in our survey about their personal civic engagement — how often they follow the news, talk about politics with family and friends, and participate in an organization (not counting their job as principal) that works to improve their community or the broader society. We found that those principals who are themselves civically engaged are far more likely to advance the practices associated with education for a diverse democracy than those who are not.

On every measure, principals who were civically more engaged lead schools that provided higher levels of professional development related to the practices associated with educating for a diverse democracy. And they were consistently more likely to have made statements in support of treating LGBTQ+ students with respect and addressing issues of race and racism in the curriculum. The increased emphasis on supporting education for a diverse democracy was strongest in Purple and Red communities. Fifty-one percent of more civically engaged principals in Purple communities, and 41% of more civically engaged principals in Red communities, reported providing professional development tied to teaching about controversial issues compared with only 29% of less engaged principals in Purple communities and 26% of less engaged principals in Red communities.

FIGURE 18. 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%

FIGURE 19. Principals in "ALL" schools strongly agreeing that they have taken supportive action, by level of principal civic engagement.

Taken Action to Support	LESS Engaged	MORE Engaged
LGBTQ+ students	51%	65%
Learning about race and racism	32%	45%

District leaders and school boards standing up for democracy

While principal commitments matter greatly, they are not sufficient on their own. District leadership matters. We found that efforts by district leadership to emphasize democratic education can make a sizable difference. Specifically, we asked principals about the degree to which their district leadership talked with them about civic education, talked about it at principals' meetings, and asked them for information about civic activities and outcomes. Interestingly, about 40% of all district leaders emphasize civic education in their interactions with high school principals and this was equally likely to occur in Blue, Purple, and Red communities.

We found that high schools in districts where leadership demonstrated this broad concern for civic education were much more likely to provide the specific supports related to controversial issue discussion, misinformation, the literature and history of diverse groups, and to address intolerance based on factors such as race and LGBTQ+ status. In districts that place a high emphasis on civic education, professional development tied to teaching about the literature and history of diverse groups was relatively common. It was provided in 81% of Blue communities, 63% of Purple communities, and 60% of Red communities. But those percentages were substantially lower — 58% in Blue communities, 36% in Purple communities, and 27% in Red communities — when principals reported that their school districts placed a low emphasis on civics.

FIGURE 20. 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%

FIGURE 21. Principals in "ALL" schools strongly agreeing that they have taken supportive action, by level of district emphasis on civic education.

Taken Action to Support	LOW Emphasis	HIGH Emphasis
LGBTQ+ students	50%	61%
Learning about race and racism	30%	44%

Parents and community members standing up for democracy

There is no doubt that principal and district commitments can have a huge impact on educating toward a diverse democracy, but a clear finding from this study is that the political commitments and actions of parents and community members are also enormously important.

Sometimes, especially in Purple contexts, principals described small numbers of activists who protested or voiced complaints related to efforts of schools to educate for a diverse democracy. And sometimes, particularly in Red communities, there was a lack of support for many of these practices.

It is also the case that many principals told us that parents and parent groups like the PTA were supportive. Yet, these supportive voices were often drowned out.

"The problem with our current moment is not too much democracy, but too little."

This raises a conundrum. If we are committed to educating for a diverse democracy, public schools need to be democratically governed and hence parents and community members have a crucial role to play. The problem with our current moment is not too much democracy, but too little. It is not anti-democratic for parents and community members to speak up to try to shape what and how young people learn. But it is anti-democratic to spread falsehoods, deny civil liberties, and employ hostile and violent rhetoric or intimidating action.

Further, while democratic governance requires that parents and community members have a meaningful say alongside professionals and other members of the public, it does not mean that any one small group of parents should be able to assert absolute control over what public schools do. At this moment, what is needed is for a broad cross-section of the public to stand up for a diverse democracy.

Opening space for students to stand up for democracy

California principal Dennis Freeman believes deeply in the importance of educating students for a diverse democracy. “We really try to get them involved civically” to deepen their “understanding of what are the issues” that matter in their community. He tells his staff that “it’s important [for students] to hear the diversity of viewpoints and opinions and to not personalize with individual attacks.” But the broader political climate — which he characterizes as “very polarized … very vitriolic” — too often fosters a vicious cycle of recrimination. “The hardest thing right now is to teach that, because the first reaction that kids will have when they feel like they’re being attacked, is that fight-flight response.”

Because this work is difficult, Dr. Freeman has supported his staff with professional development that offers strategies for engaging students in respectful inquiry and debate. Teachers have acquired tools for structuring classroom discussions through listening protocols or text-based Socratic seminars. They also have learned how to create policy debates that call upon students to analyze issues through a “point-counterpoint” framework.

Dr. Freeman has created opportunities such as a student senate for students to share their concerns and ideas for improving their school. A cadre of student leaders has emerged that are deeply committed to exercising their voice. The students plan school activities and events, but they also speak out on broader issues that touch their community. As one noted: “I like the fun stuff, but what really fuels my drive is civic engagement.”

Such engagement has created a virtuous cycle, in which students are able to stand up for democracy in ways that enable their school to support education for democracy. A prime example of this dynamic played out at a school board meeting when student leaders were scheduled to lead a presentation on issues affecting their local school. Before the students could rise to the podium, they were confronted by loud and angry voices from members of the audience who complained about the school teaching CRT and heckled the students for wearing masks. Dr. Freeman recounts: “The student board member, who’s from my school, got the microphone and chastise[d] them all.” She said: “We’re all wearing masks because we’ve all lost family members. … This isn’t about you. This is about us. This is our night to present. This is about our school, about our program. So [you] all need to be quiet.” As Dr. Freeman notes, “It was powerful.”

The student leaders went back to school and described the disruptive board meeting. In their own words, they wanted to “motivate the stressed sideliners to speak up, to help them become aware of what’s going on behind the scenes.” The student board member told her classmates: “If we don’t speak up, others will for us.”

Conclusion: "An Existential Moment" for Public Schools and for our Diverse Democracy

Public schools have long been viewed as institutions that can bring together young people with different backgrounds, experiences, identities, and beliefs in a common setting to foster their shared capacity and commitment to participate in democratic life. As Horace Mann argued in 1848, such education not only prepares students for their roles as citizens, but it enables diverse people to "become intelligible to each other."[20] To be sure, while many educators and community members have worked hard to promote this ideal, it has never fully been realized. It is challenging to create educational institutions that are more equal, inclusive, and participatory than the society in which they reside. Still, many look to this ideal as a guidepost for what public schools should be. Public schools *should* be places where all students feel welcomed and respected, and experience opportunities to forge deeper understandings of critical issues, deliberate with evidence and through mutual regard, and envision ways to act together to create a better world.

This ideal, grounded in the shared interests of all, requires public schools to maintain a certain distance from hyper-partisan conflict, even as they are governed through democratic processes. 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. It is not winner-take-all or no-holds-barred. Indeed, a winner-take-all system will erode commitment to this common project. Horace Mann understood this well. He worried that once "the schoolroom" is viewed as "a legitimate theater for party politics" then "with what violence will hostile partisans struggle to gain possession of the stage." Mann warned that if the "tempest of political strife" is "let loose upon our common schools, they would be overwhelmed with sudden ruin."[21]

Massachusetts principal Joseph Burke arrives at a similar conclusion: "The past two years have been the hardest years of my career and they have left me worried about the future of public education. They have also left me wondering about my future as a public school administrator. The intensity of the pressure from the community has been overwhelming at times. The anxiety of parents has been greater than I've ever seen. The emboldened criticism of the school, the district, and me personally has been almost non-stop. The national conservative pressure is coordinated here locally and borders on harassment and bullying. Parents who are not necessarily conservative have exerted huge pressure on the schools because they want certainty in the present and the future for their children, and we can not always provide it. This is an existential moment for the cause of public schools in this country."

Notes

1. We use pseudonyms for all principals named in this report.
2. Tim Malloy and Doug Schwartz. "Biden's Approval Rating Surges After Hitting Low Mark in July, Quinnipiac University National Poll Finds; Half of Americans Say Trump Should Be Prosecuted on Criminal Charges over His Handling of Classified Documents," *Quinnipiac University Poll*, August 31, 2022, https://poll.qu.edu/poll-release?releaseid=3854.
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