

# School and Society in the Age of Trump

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## Executive Summary

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In this age defined by the presidency of Donald J. Trump, our nation is increasingly divided and our political atmosphere highly charged. The contentious environment contributes to other societal problems, even as it makes it increasingly difficult to deal with them. America's schools are not immune from this division and incivility and are similarly challenged to address a range of issues that confront our society.

In this new study, *School and Society in the Age of Trump*, we asked a nationally representative group of more than 500 high school principals how a broad set of social issues at the forefront of the Trump presidency are felt and affect students and educators within America's high schools. We look closely at: 1) political division and hostility; 2) disputes over truth, facts, and the reliability of sources; 3) opioid addiction; 4) the threat of immigration enforcement; and 5) the threats of gun violence on school campuses. The study explores the impact on students' experiences in America's high schools as well as their learning and well-being. We also examine how high school principals throughout the U.S. responded to these challenges, and measure how the impact and responses differ across schools depending on student demographics, geographic location, or partisan orientation of the surrounding community.

Our findings make clear that in the age of Trump, America's high schools are greatly impacted by rising political incivility and division. Eighty-nine percent of principals report that incivility and contentiousness in the broader political environment has considerably affected their school community. In eighty-three percent of schools these tensions are intensified and accelerated by the flow of untrustworthy or disputed information and the increasing use of social media that is fueling and furthering division among students and between schools and the communities. And in this environment marked by fear, distrust, and social isolation, schools are impacted by and challenged to address critical issues confronting our nation including opioid abuse, immigration and gun violence. Sixty-two percent of schools have been harmed by opioid abuse. Sixty-eight percent of the principals surveyed say federal immigration enforcement policies and the political rhetoric around the issue have negatively impacted students and their families. Ninety-two percent of principals say their school has faced problems related to the threat of gun violence.

In the face of these societal challenges, it is students themselves who bear the brunt of the impact. Many students feel greater anxiety, stress, and vulnerability, and parental opioid misuse and aggressive immigration enforcement have both resulted in greater material deprivation for young people—unstable housing, insecure food supplies, and a lack of other necessary supports.

School principals are also impacted. The average principal in the study reports spending six and a half hours a week addressing the five societal challenges. One in four principals spend the equivalent of one workday a week responding to the challenges. That time represents lost opportunity costs, taking time away from efforts to meet students' academic needs and enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

Principals report spending extra time on supervision, school discipline and community outreach related to school incivility and challenges with untrustworthy information and social media. Across the challenges, many principals say they spend extra time talking and meeting with students and parents, connecting students and families with community and social services, and planning and providing professional development to help teachers address the challenges. Some principals have intervened with immigration authorities on behalf of students and families. Others have sent backpacks full of food home for the weekend, or dug into their own pockets for money to help pay utility bills or help with rent for students whose families have been affected by opioid abuse. Many principals seem to feel somewhat unprepared for dealing with the opioid crisis.

Virtually every school, regardless of region, community type, or racial make up was impacted by these challenges. More than nine in ten principals in our survey report experiencing at least three challenges and more than three in ten experiences all five challenges.

Yet, certain types of schools are more likely to be impacted by particular challenges. Schools that enroll predominantly students of color are most impacted by the threats of immigration enforcement and gun violence. Predominantly white schools are most impacted by the opioid crisis. Differences across regions are relatively modest, with the exception of the opioid crisis, which is experienced most severely in the Northeast, and the threat of immigration enforcement where the greatest impact is felt in the West. Schools located in congressional districts that voted strongly for Donald Trump in 2016 are slightly more likely than other schools to experience political incivility and the opioid crisis.

It is important to note that when multiple challenges occur within a school site, they interact with one another in complex and mutually reinforcing ways. It is likely that political division makes schools more vulnerable to the spread of untrustworthy information, just as the spread of untrustworthy information often contributes to division and hostility. And the fear and distress associated with opioid misuse, threats to immigrant communities, and gun violence, increases the possibilities for division and distrust amongst students and between educators and the broader community.

Our hope is that these results will help to present a more complete portrait of how our nation is changing in the age of Trump, and that by sharing data and stories from America's high schools, we can help educators and policymakers consider and address the effects and causes of these societal challenges during a period of political and social turmoil.

## Key Findings and Recommendations

The study findings are based on an online survey conducted in the summer of 2018 by UCLA's Institute for Democracy Education and Access (IDEA) of 505 high school principals whose schools provide a representative sample of all U.S. public high schools. The survey examined how students and schools were affected by five different societal challenges during the 2017-18 school year, as well as how principals and their colleagues responded to these challenges. UCLA IDEA also conducted 40 follow-up interviews with principals who participated in the survey selected to be representative of the larger pool of schools. A summary of key findings includes:

### Division, Incivility, and Hostility in American High Schools

- Almost nine in ten principals report that incivility and contentiousness in the broader political environment has considerably affected their school community.
- An overwhelming majority of principals report problems such as contentious classroom environments, hostile exchanges outside of class, and demeaning or hateful remarks over political views.
- Expressions of hostility towards racial groups or immigrants are heard across a wide swath of American public schools. More than eight in ten principals report that their students have made derogatory remarks about other racial or ethnic groups.
- More than six in ten principals say their students have made derogatory remarks about immigrants.
- The most commonly reported instances of racial hostility echo President Trump's "Build the Wall" rhetoric on immigration.
- Almost eight in ten principals report that they have disciplined students for uncivil behavior toward other students in the past school year.
- School principals report "time consuming and arduous" work to address "volatile exchanges" on campus and say they spend an average of nearly an hour and a half a week responding to these challenges.
- Principals are almost twice as likely to speak specifically about the importance of respecting students from different racial or ethnic minority groups (85%) as about respecting immigrant youth (49%).

- Principals in predominantly white schools are less likely than principals in racially mixed schools, and far less likely than principals in schools enrolling predominantly students of color, to talk about tolerance toward immigrant youth.
- Principals in predominantly white schools located in congressional districts that voted heavily for Donald Trump in 2016 are the least likely to report having spoken with their student body about promoting tolerance and respect toward immigrant youth.

## Untrustworthy Information in America's High Schools

In the midst of the political division of the Trump era, transformations in the national media landscape are propelling the flow of unfiltered and often untrustworthy information across American society. In this environment students struggle to discern fact from opinion, identify quality sources, or participate in inclusive and diverse deliberations on social issues. School climate also suffers as students use social media to call one another names or spread rumors.

The vast majority of high school principals surveyed and interviewed report experiencing problems at their school related to the flow of untrustworthy or disputed information.

- More than eight in ten principals say their school has faced one or more problems such as students frequently making unfounded claims based on unreliable media sources; students rejecting the information or media sources the teacher is using; or parent or community members challenging the information or media sources used by teachers.
- Many principals across a broad cross-section of schools also highlight ways that students' abilities to access and share unfiltered and untrustworthy information through social media platforms has upset both classroom learning and school climate.
- More than nine in ten principals report that "students have shared hateful posts on social media."
- Many principals highlight the detrimental effects of cyberbullying on their school culture.
- Principals in the survey say they spend more than one hour each week responding to these concerns.

## The Opioid Crisis in America's High Schools

The opioid crisis has continued to play out in communities and states across the nation during the first two years of the Trump administration. Eleven million Americans misused opioids in 2016, resulting in 42,249 deaths from overdose, or more than 130 deaths every day. Every region in the nation has been affected, but the impact has been most strongly felt in West Virginia, Ohio, New Hampshire, and Maryland, as well as in rural areas.

- More than six in ten high school principals in our survey report that their schools have been impacted by the opioid crisis.
- Principals say opioid addiction in students' families has resulted in student concerns about their well-being or the well-being of family members, students losing focus in class or missing classes, parent and guardian difficulties in supporting students, and a lack of parent and guardian participation in school activities.
- Principals in predominantly white schools are far more likely than their peers to report these problems and to note they have occurred multiple times.
- Schools in small towns and rural areas are most affected.
- Almost one-third of principals interviewed report fatal overdoses occurring within their school community.

- Many principals described how students' lives are upended when parents become addicted, impacting their mental health and also often resulting in extreme financial hardship.
- Principals whose schools are affected by the opioid crisis dedicate an average of more than one hour each week addressing these challenges.
- The vast majority of principals report talking with individual students about their concerns, connecting students to counseling or social welfare services, and/or partnering with community based organizations adept at providing supports for students and families.
- About one-third of principals offer professional development opportunities for their faculty to support students with addicted family members.
- Principals feel somewhat unprepared for dealing with the opioid crisis. Most principals do not have protocols or systematic plans to deal with student addiction or dangerous drug use at this scale.

## The Threat of Immigration Enforcement in America's High Schools

Since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, students across the country have experienced mounting uncertainty and fear due to their families' immigration status. The rhetoric and actions of the president and his administration have dramatically heightened the vulnerability of these children and taken a toll on their physical and mental health and education. A "climate of fear" pervades many immigrant communities, creating stress and anxiety for parents and children alike.

More than two-thirds of the principals surveyed report that federal immigration enforcement policies and the political rhetoric around the issue have harmed student well-being and learning or undermined the ability of parents to support student learning. Principals say:

- Students from immigrant families experienced difficulty focusing on class lessons or missed school due to policies or political rhetoric related to immigrants.
- Immigrant parents and guardians have experienced difficulty participating in school activities or supporting their students' well-being and academic progress at home.
- More than half of principals report that immigrant parents and guardians have been reluctant to share information with the school.
- Students and parents are reluctant to discuss their citizenship status with school personnel.
- Principals whose schools are located in congressional districts that voted strongly for President Trump in 2016 are less likely to report student concerns due to immigration policies than principals in congressional districts that voted strongly against President Trump.
- Principals who report that their schools have been impacted by the threat of immigration enforcement spend an average of more than an hour and a half per week responding to related student and family concerns.
- More than nine in ten principals have spoken with impacted students and directed them to counseling and other social welfare supports.
- Eight in ten principals surveyed report partnering with community-based organizations that provide services for immigrant students and families, while five in ten report connecting families to legal services.

## The Threat of Gun Violence in America's High Schools

There were 1611 gun-related homicides of fifteen to nineteen year olds in the United States in 2016. An average of twenty students are killed each year on K-12 campuses, representing one to two percent of all youth homicides. Between the school shootings in Columbine, Colorado in 1999 and Parkland, Florida in 2018, there have been shootings at 193 schools, affecting more than 187,000 enrolled students. Almost all of the high school principals we surveyed and interviewed report that their schools have been impacted by the threat of gun violence.

- More than nine in ten principals say their school has faced problems such as students concerns about the threat of gun violence in school or the surrounding community, lost focus in class or missed school time due to concerns with gun violence, and, parent and community member concerns about the threat of gun violence in the school or surrounding community.
- Principals from California to Connecticut say that, in comparison with all other challenges, this topic (gun violence) “has captured the most attention,” represents the “largest stress,” and poses the “gravest concerns.”
- The threat of gun violence impacts schools across all demographic and regional categories. Schools with large proportions of students of color have been affected most.
- Principals dedicate more time addressing problems associated with the threats of gun violence than any other challenge they currently face. On average, principals who report any impact from gun violence spend more than two hours per week addressing the issue.
- One in five principals interviewed recount incidents involving firearms on campus.
- One in three principals interviewed report that their school received threats of mass shootings, bombings, or both at some point during the previous school year. Many of these threats occurred in the days following the Parkland shooting.
- Principals say they also spend considerable time and energy addressing stress and anxiety and talking with various constituencies about the problem. Almost all principals in our survey report that they seek to reduce student concerns by talking to them and connecting them with counseling services.
- Principals are also spending time creating conditions to prevent and respond to school shootings. Most principals interviewed have focused their efforts to prevent gun violence on “hardening” their school campus and many schools have also moved to limit entry and exit to one “secure” site on campus.
- It was rare for principals in our study to respond to the threat of gun violence in a manner consistent with the comprehensive public health model of school safety—which represents the consensus approach within school safety scholarship. That model emphasizes establishing a school climate in which students feel a sense of connection with and responsibility toward one another. It also entails investing in counselors, psychologists, and social workers who can identify students in need of counseling and provide mental health services.

## Cumulative Effects: Societal Challenges and America's High Schools

The principals who participated in our study come from schools that reflect the rich diversity of public high schools across the United States. Virtually every one of these principals experienced at least one of the five challenges addressed in the study. Often they experience several challenges at once. Certain types of schools are more likely to be impacted (and impacted severely) by particular challenges.

- Almost all schools experience at least two challenges, more than nine in ten experience at least three challenges, more than seven in ten experience at least four challenges, and more than three in ten experience all five challenges.
- Schools enrolling predominantly students of color are most impacted by the threats of immigration enforcement and gun violence.
- Predominantly white schools are most impacted by the opioid crisis.

- Differences across regions are relatively modest, with the exception of the opioid crisis, which is experienced most severely in the Northeast, and the threat of immigration enforcement where the greatest impact is felt in the West.
- Schools located in congressional districts that voted strongly for Donald Trump in 2016 are slightly more likely than other schools to experience political incivility and the opioid crisis.

It is important to note that when multiple challenges occur within a school site, they interact with one another in complex and mutually reinforcing ways.

## Recommendations

School principals in the age of Trump encounter substantial obstacles. The challenges outlined in this report affect schools in all communities. Resolving them will likely require solutions that encompass more than access to material supports. Education and social policies that address fear, social isolation, and distrust are needed, and are likely to continue to be needed for the foreseeable future. If public high schools in the U.S. are to prepare young people to grow into compassionate and committed community members, our society and our schools must exhibit care, support connectedness, and promote civility. And society and schools especially must do this across social, political, and racial divides.

It is beyond the scope of this report to map out what this means for or may be required at the societal level. The focus of our recommendations lies with changing conditions and practices in America's high schools. We call for relationship-centered schools that attend to the holistic needs of young people and their families, while building social trust and understanding. In such schools, caring and well-trained professionals support student development, link young people and families to community-based services, encourage thoughtful inquiry, and foster respectful dialogue. Creating and supporting such schools requires an educational policy framework that responds to the demands of the Age of Trump. We recommend:

- 1. Establish and communicate school climate standards emphasizing care, connectedness, and civility and then create practices that enable educational systems to document and report on conditions associated with these standards.*
- 2. Build professional capacity within educational systems to address the holistic needs of students and communities and extend this capacity by supporting connections between school-based educators and other governmental agencies and community-based organizations serving young people and their families*
- 3. Develop integrated systems of health, mental health, and social welfare support for students and their families.*
- 4. Create and support networks of educators committed to fostering care, connectedness, and strong civility in their public education systems.*