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**In Age of Trump, American High Schools are Challenged by Political Incivility,
Divided by Misinformation and Social Media, Impacted by Societal Issues**

New national survey by Institute for Democracy, Education and Access at UCLA finds schools struggling to deal with issues of Opioid Epidemic, Immigration Enforcement and Gun Violence

At the mid-point of the presidency of Donald J. Trump, a new survey finds America's high schools greatly impacted by political incivility and riven by untrustworthy information and the omnipresent use of social media. In this highly charged environment, schools are struggling to address many of the same critical issues confronting the nation, including opioid abuse, immigration and gun violence. These issues are impacting students and schools and taking needed time away from the efforts of school principals to strengthen teaching and learning.

[*School and Society in the Age of Trump*](#), a nationally representative survey of 505 high school principals conducted by the *Institute for Democracy, Education and Access at UCLA* examines 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.

Responding to the survey, 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. More than 8 in 10 principals report that their students have made derogatory remarks about other racial or ethnic groups, and more than 6 in 10 principals say their students have made derogatory remarks about immigrants. In interviews with principals, the most commonly reported instances of racial hostility echo President Trump's rhetoric on immigration, with several principals recounting stories of white students chanting "Build the wall!" to demean and threaten students of color.

These tensions are intensified and accelerated by the flow of untrustworthy or disputed information across schools. The omnipresent use of social media is also

fueling and furthering division among students and between schools and their communities. Students struggle to discern fact from opinion, identify quality sources, or participate in inclusive and diverse deliberations on social issues. School climate suffers as students use social media to call one another names or spread rumors. Almost six in ten teens report having experienced some form of cyber-bullying. "Social media" one principal says, "is destroying school safety and climate."

"These findings make clear that schools are not immune from what is happening across the nation, says John Rogers, a professor of Education at UCLA and the director of IDEA. "The flow of the nation's harsh political rhetoric does not stop at the school house gate, but instead, propelled by misinformation and social media, is fueling anger, fear and division that is negatively impacting students, schools and learning."

Amid this tense and divided environment, principals report their 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 impacted by opioid abuse. Two-thirds of the principals surveyed say federal immigration enforcement policies and the political rhetoric around the issue have harmed student well being and learning. Ninety-two percent of principals say their school has faced problems related to the threat of gun violence

"In an environment propelled by fear, distrust and social isolation, schools are feeling the heat of many of the same issues tearing at the fabric of our nation," Rogers says. "Principals tell us these issues are raising student stress and anxiety and causing students to lose focus in the classroom or miss classes altogether."

School principals are also affected. The average principal in the study reports spending six and a half hours a week addressing the five societal challenges, taking time away from efforts to meet students' academic needs and enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

"School principals in the age of Trump encounter substantial obstacles," Rogers says. But the response of some school leaders to these challenges has been nothing less than heroic."

Across the challenges, many principals report spending 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. Principals have intervened with immigration authorities on behalf of students, and in dealing with the opioid crisis, some principals have sent backpacks full of food home for the weekend with students or dug into their own pockets for money to help pay utility bills or help with rent.

Virtually every school, regardless of region, community type or racial make up was impacted by these societal challenges. More than nine in ten principals in the survey report experiencing at least three challenges and more than three in ten experiences all five challenges. Certain types of schools are more likely to be impacted by particular challenges. Racially mixed schools are most impacted by untrustworthy information and political division. 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. The opioid crisis is experienced most severely in the Northeast, and the impact of threat of immigration enforcement is greatest in the West. The researchers also 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,” Rogers says. “And the fear and distress associated with threats to immigrant communities, gun violence and opioid misuse, increases the possibilities for division and distrust amongst students and between educators and the broader community.”

The report includes a set of recommendations for changing conditions and practices in America’s high schools and offers an educational policy framework that responds to the demands of the Age of Trump.

“Our hope is that by sharing this data and stories from America’s high schools, as well as our recommendations, we can help educators and policymakers ease these tensions and further their efforts to address the societal challenges that threaten to undermine student learning in period of political and social turmoil.”

School and Society in the age of Trump, is based on an online survey conducted in the summer of 2018 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. The survey was conducted by the UCLA Institute for Democracy Education and Access (IDEA) at the UCLA Graduate School Of Education and Information Studies. 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 with a list of key findings, as well as the full report is available at <https://idea.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/school-and-society-in-age-of-trump/>