

DIVERSITY CORNER

It is Our Responsibility to Mold a Healthier Type of American Politics

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In today's climate, marked by deepening political divides, schools across the commonwealth have a unique and powerful opportunity: to guide students in becoming informed, critical-thinking and civically engaged citizens who contribute to a healthier, more unified society. While polarization is widely recognized, it is crucial to remember that many Americans share common values. A recent survey by [*Starts with Us*](#) (2023) revealed that 87% of Americans are weary of the current political divisiveness. This collective sentiment points to an urgent need for change — and our schools can be at the forefront of this transformation.

Shifting the Culture: Moving Beyond Divisiveness

One of the first steps in fostering a healthier discourse is acknowledging that, while some voices seek to perpetuate division, these perspectives do not represent the majority. Educators and school leaders must guide students in understanding that these divisive voices do not have to shape their worldview or influence their interactions. A key principle to embrace is moving beyond villainizing those with differing opinions and instead creating a school culture that emphasizes mutual respect and understanding.

The cycle of division is reinforced when individuals isolate themselves within like-minded groups or “tribes,” where conversations often reinforce existing beliefs without exposure to differing perspectives. This isolation fosters distrust and prevents meaningful engagement across divides. In schools, we can break this cycle by teaching students to engage thoughtfully and constructively with those who hold different views. Such discussions must be rooted in empathy, active listening and a genuine desire to understand the other side.

Building a Foundation for Productive Discourse

To address polarization, students must first learn the art of discussion — how to ask questions, answer thoughtfully and debate respectfully. This involves practicing open-mindedness and adopting a collaborative approach to seeking common ground. Classroom activities that model these skills can include structured debates, collaborative projects and facilitated dialogues that require students to engage with differing viewpoints constructively. By equipping students with these tools, we prepare them to approach contentious topics not as battles to win, but as opportunities to grow and find shared solutions.

Assumptions Matter: Leading with Trust and Goodwill

A vital component of productive discourse is the belief that those involved in the conversation are acting in good faith. When students enter discussions assuming the worst of those who disagree with them, conversations become adversarial and unproductive. Conversely, when discussions are approached with an assumption of goodwill, participants are more willing to listen, learn and engage constructively. Schools can help instill this mindset by modeling respectful interactions and reinforcing that disagreement does not equate to hostility.

Practical Steps for School Leaders

To cultivate a generation that values productive discourse, school leaders can:

1. **Integrate Civics Education:** Embed lessons in critical thinking, media literacy and respectful dialogue across the curriculum.
2. **Create Safe Spaces for Dialogue:** Establish programs or clubs where students can openly discuss current events and social issues in a structured, respectful manner.
3. **Highlight Commonalities:** Encourage students to explore shared values and beliefs as a starting point for deeper conversations.
4. **Model Empathy and Curiosity:** Lead by example in promoting an open-minded and empathetic school environment.

The Path Forward

Schools have always played a crucial role in shaping society by fostering informed and engaged citizens. By teaching students how to listen, question and respond with respect, we help create a foundation for a more connected and understanding community. This foundation not only benefits our students but contributes to a broader cultural shift that values dialogue over division and progress over polarization.

With dedication and purpose, the commonwealth's schools can serve as beacons of hope and unity, setting the stage for future generations to lead with understanding, empathy and civic responsibility.

Reference:

Starts With Us: American Values Poll. (May 2023). Starts with Us and NORC at the University of Chicago. <https://startswith.us/>.