

## Holding the Trump Card: How Should Schools Address Controversial Issues in the 2016 Presidential Election?<sup>1</sup>

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Near the end of August 2016, Sutton High School was humming with teachers setting up their classrooms, the guidance office busily finalizing students' schedules, and the football team running drills in the late summer heat. Kevin Foster grinned as he bounded up the front steps and headed toward his office. He had always loved the anticipation of a new school year. He felt especially enthusiastic this year, his second full year as Sutton's principal. No longer beset by constant newbie jitters, Kevin was excited to work with the faculty at Sutton to explore interdisciplinary and design-based learning, as well as to strengthen school culture and community cohesion in the light of changing demographics. New refugees from Syria and Guatemala, and declining financial stability among many long-time residents, were challenging Sutton's traditional sense of itself as a working- and middle-class Italian, Irish, and Puerto Rican school. Kevin was determined to foster a welcoming and inclusive school culture before divisions among groups of students became entrenched.

As he entered the main office, Kevin offered a hearty greeting to the five members of the school's social studies department who were waiting to meet with him. "It's a beautiful morning to celebrate Sutton social studies!" Kevin boomed. "Come on in!"

The five filed into his office, arranging their chairs in a semi-circle facing his desk. Sitting to Kevin's left was Sharon Hadinger, the longest serving teacher at Sutton High. She had been teaching since the early 1980's and was venerated throughout the school and community. Many of Sutton's students had heard of "Mrs. H" from their parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, well before making it to her classroom themselves. To Sharon's left were Andrew Cooper and Parker Hathaway, both recent college graduates. Although he had been teaching only two years, Andrew was already cultivating a stellar reputation as a rigorous but humane teacher. Parker had brought fresh energy to the required U.S. government classes when he began teaching three years ago. He often engineered simulations and debates, and was well known for playing devil's advocate to push students' thinking further. Rounding out the group were Jacqui Parsons and Todd Swenson, both ten-year veterans. Each had come to teaching as a second profession—Jacqui had been a lawyer and Todd a journalist—and showed real devotion to the work. Kevin reflected, not for the first time, how grateful he was to have such a rock star department.

"You wanted to talk about You Choose, right?" Kevin asked, recalling Sharon's e-mail from a few days before.

"Yes," Sharon said. "We wanted to meet with you because we can't agree on whether or not we should do You Choose this year."

Kevin was stunned. You Choose was a celebrated Sutton tradition. Although Kevin had never seen it in action, since this was only his second year at the school, he knew that students had for decades been participating in an elaborate mock election activity each major state or national election year. The social studies department worked as a team to facilitate the 11-week program, which began the first day of school and ended the week after Election Day. They found it exhausting,

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<sup>1</sup> This case is a work of fiction, drawing on questions, examples, and concerns from educators around the country. It does not, however, refer to any particular school or district.

he knew, but also thrilling; it was seen as one of the perks, in fact, of teaching social studies at Sutton.

Students venerated You Choose, too, viewing it almost as a high school rite of passage. Many of their parents had participated in You Choose during their own days at Sutton High. It was one of the things that made Sutton, Sutton. Students also appreciated that You Choose offered so many different avenues for participation. Many students tended to choose to join a political party and campaign for its nominee. The campaigns consisted of an intricately organized hierarchy of positions. Each nominee was traditionally played by a Sutton senior. Together with his or her campaign manager, traditionally a junior, they led each campaign. Advising the leadership were senior staff members, including a communications director and press secretary. Students also took on policy specialist roles, directing the campaign's environmental, military, or economic policy, for example. Over the years, the campaigns' communications had become more sophisticated, using social networks to retweet or repost the actual nominee's positions.

While the majority of students joined campaigns, many other students decided to be members of the media. The media group used a school website to conduct online polls and publish the results, along with updates about the campaigns, editorials from budding pundits, information on elections, and interviews with the candidates and their spokespeople. The school even had its own You Choose channel. In the 2012 election, students also initiated new media outlets, targeted at certain demographic groups or adopting a more arch, even snarky, tone to imitate BuzzFeed and other new media.

Finally, a smaller group of students created interest groups to advocate for specific issues of particular interest to them. Some replicated organizations like Greenpeace or the National Rifle Association. Other students started entirely novel issue advocacy organizations to reflect their passions. Following the rise of super-PACs that support a particular candidate but are officially separate from their campaign, some students had also started their own super-PACs, also with elaborate web sites and outreach campaigns.

You Choose culminated in a school-wide debate between the two candidates that was traditionally moderated by one of the local TV anchors. Students then voted in a school-wide election on election day, and debriefed the results of the election, as well as what they learned from the entire process, over the following week.

Kevin had been looking forward to seeing You Choose in action. He had also been thinking it could be a terrific jumpstart for some of Sutton's new immigrants to learn about and participate in U.S. political traditions. What's more, it was such a tradition in the community. Parents and other community members had already been contacting Kevin about volunteering for this year's iteration. This was the event Sharon had just said the department was thinking about cancelling for the 2016 election?

"I confess I'm surprised," Kevin said, carefully. "Let me hear what you all think. Sharon, why don't you go first?"

"The point of You Choose," Sharon began, "is to teach kids what it means to be an engaged citizen in a democracy. That's what I had in mind when I started it thirty years ago. The most authentic way to teach civic engagement skills is to let students articulate and debate the opinions of real candidates. That way the kids can make up their own minds.

"Since it's effectively engaged students in the past and clearly teaches them civic engagement skills," Sharon continued, "I think we should do You Choose this fall exactly as we have in the past. The problem is that the whole department doesn't agree. And we can't pull this off piecemeal. It's gotta be all or nothing."

"I understand about the need to work together," Kevin replied. "I guess I don't understand what the problem is. Why is this year any different from the past? Andrew, can you explain?"

"I celebrate the benefits of You Choose," Andrew responded, "and ordinarily I would agree with Sharon. We want kids to make up their own minds. But this year's election is different. Trump, the official Republican nominee, is a demagogue who uses racist, Islamophobic, misogynistic, and

xenophobic rhetoric in his speeches. We simply can't allow our students to voice the things he has said. If we permitted our students to use Trump's rhetoric, we risk harming them, especially our Hispanic and our new Muslim students."

Andrew paused for a moment, then asked, "Do you all remember what happened at that basketball game at Johnston?"

The others nodded. They knew that Andrew was referring to a high school basketball game that York and Johnston high schools had played back in February. York's team, composed mostly of students whose families were from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, was winning the game when students from the Johnston bleachers began chanting, "Build the Wall! You're gonna pay!" and "USA! USA! USA!"

"I don't want You Choose events or our school-wide debate to devolve into that kind of racist name-calling," Andrew said. "And what happened at that basketball game wasn't an isolated incident either. There's evidence that minority students across the country are feeling threatened and upset by classmates who appeared to support Trump.<sup>2</sup> I don't want You Choose to give students an excuse to bully each other. I don't want it to negatively affect our school culture."

"Do you have an alternative in mind?" Kevin asked.

"I suggest we modify You Choose," Andrew responded. "I think we should keep the central components of the activity – the campaigns, media, and interest groups – because they facilitate interdependent group work and the roles teach students how to analyze documents, write arguments, and think critically. But, throughout the You Choose campaign and during the debate, we have to prevent the Trump campaign from expressing disrespectful policy positions."

"We can't censor one campaign but not the other!" Sharon exclaimed. "We're a public school—we can't get into that! Also, one of the strengths of You Choose is that we, as teachers, are impartial. That's the way I like to teach elections and controversial issues in my classes. I always try to keep students in the dark about which political party I belong to or which candidate I support. That way they'll feel comfortable enough to share their opinions. If we censor only the Trump campaign, we would isolate and marginalize Trump supporters."

"Also, why do you think that Trump supporters are necessarily racist?" Parker jumped in. "Trump is trying to remove barriers of political correctness and open up frank discussions about the problems that face this country. He's talking about loss of jobs and sinking wages, tax dollars supporting illegals instead of law-abiding American citizens, the war on police, the need to look at high-risk groups like jihadist Muslims to stop violence and terrorism getting out of control. Yeah, that makes some people uncomfortable. But that's not racism; that's courage. Only by destroying the shackles of political correctness can we really start solving the problems that are facing us as a nation."<sup>3</sup>

"Wait, do you really mean this, Parker?" Andrew asked, looking shocked. "Do you support Trump?"

"Like Sharon said, it shouldn't be relevant who I support," Parker responded. "We're a public school, where all viewpoints should be aired and challenged. That's my job as a government teacher, to help students give all ideas a run for their money. Speaking of which, what about accusations against Hillary, that she whips up hatred against police? A bunch of our kids' parents are first responders, you know. Why are we more protective of our Hispanic and Muslim students than we are of cops' kids?"

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<sup>2</sup> Maureen B. Costello (2016). "The Trump Effect: The Impact of the Presidential Campaign on Our Nation's Schools." Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center. <https://www.splcenter.org/20160413/trump-effect-impact-presidential-campaign-our-nations-schools>.

<sup>3</sup> Ideas and some quotations taken from <https://www.quora.com/Donald-Trump-supporters-Why-should-I-support-Donald-Trump#>.

“So then we censor both campaigns, if necessary.”

“How we could do that pedagogically?” Sharon queried. “How could we have an authentic, student-led debate between the candidates if we’re controlling what they can and can’t say? And what about the policy advocacy groups, or the super-PACs, or even the media? Where would it all stop?”

Jacqui jumped in. “I agree with Sharon this wouldn’t be practical. I also don’t think censoring student speech would be legal. Remember the Supreme Court case *Tinker v. Des Moines*?” A “recovering lawyer,” as she jokingly referred to herself, Jacqui had found her calling as an American Government and Street Law teacher after quitting her old law firm.

The other teachers nodded in response to Jacqui’s reference to *Tinker*, but as a former math teacher, Kevin had never had a reason to study Supreme Court cases. “Can you fill me in?” he asked.

“It was during the Vietnam War,” Jacqui explained. “A few high school students, including one named Mary Beth Tinker, decided to wear black armbands to school to protest America’s involvement in Vietnam. The school suspended her in an attempt to quell the student protest. Tinker sued the school for violating her First Amendment right to free speech. The Supreme Court heard the case and ruled for Tinker. The Court said that students don’t lose their right to free speech when they come to school.

“To suppress students’ political speech,” Jacqui continued, “a school must be able to demonstrate that the student speech or expression would ‘materially and substantially interfere’ with the rights of students to be secure and left alone. That’s the standard we’d have to meet if we wanted to censor the Trump candidate or campaign—or the Clinton one. I’m not sure we could demonstrate that, which is why I’m not sure if we could get away with censoring students.”

“But Jacqui,” Todd jumped in, “the student media group publishes its You Choose stories on a school website and the school’s YouTube channel.”

“Why does that matter?” Kevin asked.

“It matters because when it appears in a school publication, it counts as ‘school sponsored speech’—which we have the right to censor—not as students’ political speech,” Todd explained.

“Even if it’s about politics, and if it represents students’ own views?” Sharon pressed.

“Well, it’s complicated,” Todd admitted. “But yeah, when it’s expressed in a school-sponsored publication—and even when it just appears to be speech that’s sponsored by the school, which You Choose would seem to be, since we definitely sponsor the whole process—then the school can assert control. That’s thanks to *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier*; we go over it in my Journalism classes. In 1988, well after *Tinker*, the Supreme Court ruled that teachers and school administrators can censor articles written by students in a school newspaper if they have ‘legitimate pedagogical concerns’ about what students say.”

“That’s a good point,” Jacqui affirmed. “*Tinker* might still apply when students are talking about the election on their own, after school, and so forth. But Todd’s certainly right that we can censor anything on our YouTube channel and website. The Court especially called out speech for censorship that violates the ‘shared values of a civilized social order.’ I guess that could be especially pertinent this year, with some of the stuff that Trump and his supporters are saying.”

“Or Clinton and her surrogates,” Parker chimed in.

“Okay, let’s not go there again,” Kevin intervened. “I just want to get a handle on the logistics of this. And on what the right thing to do is.” Kevin was beginning to realize how many thorny questions You Choose raised—not just about social studies curriculum and pedagogy, but also more broadly about school culture, ethics, law, and democracy itself. Kevin turned back to Todd. “Do you think we should do You Choose this year?”

“The most important thing we need to do is teach kids how to evaluate ideas,” Todd replied. “That’s part of the Common Core, part of our job as social studies teachers, and a key part of a civic engagement activity like You Choose. If we can get students to learn how to identify the characteristics of a good policy, idea, or argument, we can let students make up their own minds.”

“But Todd,” Andrew exclaimed, “you emphasized the importance of making sure our kids can distinguish between strong and weak arguments. Most of Trump’s positions lack any evidence whatsoever. Sorry, Parker, but you know that’s true. Do you think we should allow students to repeat those false claims in a You Choose campaign event or during the school-wide debate? Wouldn’t permitting unsubstantiated arguments be pedagogically negligent?”

“As long as we teach our students how to analyze and critique arguments, we shouldn’t need to censor them,” Todd said. “They should know how to distinguish opinion from fact.”

“So do you agree with Sharon and Parker?” Kevin asked. “Should we continue You Choose as usual this year?”

“I’m torn,” Todd admitted. “I agree with Sharon that the point of You Choose is to teach civic engagement skills. I’m not sure I entirely agree with her statement that we should always appear impartial, or with Parker that we give every side equal airtime and hold them up for equal scrutiny. But I do agree that You Choose has always been a really inspiring and motivating way to teach students how to analyze and evaluate information. On the other hand, I am sympathetic to Andrew’s concerns about the effects this campaign could have on our minority students. We want to build kids up, not tear them down.”

“Although I wish it could be different,” Todd reflected slowly, “I think it would be more pragmatic to abandon You Choose this year. We can use less controversial civic engagement tools to teach the election. For example, we could have students write persuasive essays, collect polling data from around the community and use it to predict local and state elections, write non-partisan fact sheets about the major candidates, visit a polling place, talk with local officials. There are a lot of options we could choose from.”

“You’re right, Todd,” Sharon responded. “There are many alternatives to You Choose. But we shouldn’t decide to use them in order to avoid engaging with partisan politics. During this election more than any other, we need to make sure we don’t shy away from teaching controversial issues. We shouldn’t stand for that, and our parents and community members won’t stand for it, either.”

“Oh, I completely agree about teaching the issues,” Todd responded. “But I’m not sure You Choose is the right way to do it. I think you underestimate the controversy it might create—not least among our parents.”

“Or maybe this is exactly why we have to stick to You Choose as is?” Jacqui ventured. “If we don’t create a safe space for controversial discussions and help our students learn to deliberate these issues with one another, who will?”

“Exactly,” affirmed Parker.

“But if we can’t keep Sutton a safe space—which we won’t be able to, if we permit racist discourse on campus—then we further marginalize our most vulnerable students, and our school culture is destroyed, maybe for years to come,” Andrew shot back.

Silence descended on the room. Kevin leaned back in his chair, looked at the five faces opposite him, and considered the decision they had to make. Should they run You Choose as normal, modify it, or abandon it this year? Kevin knew he wanted Sutton High students to appreciate the complexity of controversy. But he didn’t want them—or his teachers—to end up at the center of controversy itself. Was that possible? What should the team decide?