



## Putting Up a Fight?

### BRIEF-CASE

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Halfway through her leadership team's weekly meeting, Taylor Public Schools' Superintendent Carla Woodley raises an issue she expects might prove contentious. "After hearing the public comments at last week's meeting, the board let me know that they'd like us to draft some recommendations for a new policy regulating classroom posters. In particular, they'd like something that will help keep 'political material' off the walls."

Several team members groan. While Taylor has long enjoyed a reputation as a peaceful bedroom community with strong public schools, there has been increasing disagreement about what makes those schools strong. A growing partisan divide in Taylor is evident not just in the political signs planted in front yards but also in the comments heard at PTA and school board meetings. Recently, a controversy has been brewing over posters hung in several classrooms at Taylor Middle School; they feature cartoon hands in different skin tones, ranging from dark to pale, under the words "All Are Welcome Here."

"Well, I can't say I'm surprised," Hazel Daou, Director of Operations, says. "But I hardly think that a sign reading 'All Are Welcome Here' counts as political material."

"Not everyone agrees," Dr. Woodley cautions. "The parents who complained at the last board meeting—saying that the signs create division by emphasizing racial difference—were speaking on behalf of a larger group."

"However, I'd like to point out that this week the *Gazette* published an open letter from a different group of parents," Bruno Rabb, Director of Curriculum, clarifies. "They believe that the signs promote belonging and inclusion, which, as they say, is especially important in a country where in fact not all *have* been welcome at school in our history."

"My thoughts exactly," Hazel chimes in.

"The community is clearly divided," Grace Mody, Special Education Director, says. "We need to provide a policy that teachers can use to determine what to put up."

"Do we really need a policy that specifies what teachers can put on their walls?" Assistant Superintendent Suki Abe asks. "For decades we've trusted teachers to make good decisions for their classrooms. Maybe instead we could recommend that the board put out a statement supporting teachers' autonomy to choose what belongs on their walls."

"I think the policy would be protection for the teachers as much as anything," Bruno disagrees. "It would be nice for teachers to have something to point to if students or parents *do* challenge something teachers put up."

"I agree it could help teachers to have a policy," Hazel says, "but I don't think the word 'political' belongs in it. Who determines what makes a message or an image 'political'? I worry that teachers would end up leaving their walls blank for fear of being called out."

"What about a policy requiring that content on the walls be 'neutral'?" Grace suggests. "That feels less divisive than the term 'political.'"

“I doubt a policy like that would help teachers,” Suki objects. “Isn’t ‘All Are Welcome’ a neutral message? I mean, either all students are welcome or they’re not.”

“It might have been neutral five or ten years ago,” Dr. Woodley sighs. “But times have changed. For some people, anything that seems to reference race is divisive.”

“But we don’t need to write policy that mollifies those people!” Hazel argues. “Inclusion is a huge part of the work we do here. Why would we want a policy that disallows those signs?”

“Oh, I assumed we wanted a policy that *would* disallow the signs,” Will Moeller, Director of Finance, pipes up. “After all, inclusion is built through positive relationships, not words on a wall. If signs are causing all this division, shouldn’t they come down?”

“Seriously?” Hazel bursts out. “The problem isn’t the signs; it’s the people who don’t like them!”

Dr. Woodley steps in: “Okay, this is clearly a tough topic. Let’s just take a minute to think: is there anything we agree belongs in a policy about material that gets put up on classroom walls?”

**To cite this case study:**

O’Brien, S. & Levinson, M. (2025). Putting Up a Fight? *Justice in Schools*.

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