Walling Off or Welcoming In? Facilitator's Guide

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Case Summary

At a meeting of the School Culture Committee (SCC), Jersey City K-8 works to draft a new school policy to address the recent surge in divisive language and behavior following President Trump's election. Within the past week, first grade students built a block wall and began chanting "Build the Wall!", a White seventh grader felt excluded by a poster expressing the acceptance of all minority students, and pro- and anti-Trump students across the school found it hard to maintain their friendships with one another. The SCC must determine where and how to draw boundaries between free political speech and offensive or harmful speech that qualifies as bullying or harassment.

Goals

By the end of the session, staff will be able to:
- describe and explain multiple perspectives on the topic of student political language and discourse.
- discuss the ways in which teacher neutrality may both foster and constrain students' political discourse and sense of membership.
- compare protected political speech to bullying and harassing speech, and identify clear cases of each as well as ambiguous cases in the "gray zone."
- propose policies and practices for supporting inclusive classroom/school culture in diverse settings.

Essential Questions

1. To what extent does "talking politics" result in emotional distress or broken friendships at our school?
2. To what extent are we receiving reports of bullying and harassment that satisfy the definitions of state law?
3. To what extent is our school culture weathering the new political climate since the election of Trump? What are some best practices at our school that have supported students through their anxiety?

Agenda

1. Discuss the essential questions above in order to ground the inquiry in the specific context of your school.
2. Read the case, either silently or aloud, taking roles.
3. Follow the Justice in Schools Case Discussion Protocol for discussing the case.
4. Applying the dilemmas of the case to your school context, imagine that you were going to craft or revise your school's policy around student language and accountability.
5. What would you decide?

Follow-Up or Alternative Activities

- Discuss this case at Instructional Leadership Team meetings in order to establish developmentally appropriate policies
- Discuss this case at a PTO meeting in order to engage families as partners in forging a climate of

civil discourse
- Revise this case by inserting perspectives or opinions that were not included and analyze how each competing perspective can alter the nature of the dilemma
- Examine your own political biases and reflect on which students or values win or lose when your biases come through in your teaching.
- Individually, and then as a group, develop (or revise) a list of core school values and list them in priority order before crafting a policy (Can be adapted for students in order to create classroom rules)
- Identity Web: Each staff member makes a poster with defining identity markers (white, Jewish, gay, male, immigrant, adopted, etc.) With yarn, connect to every other person in the room who shares a single identity marker. Note that when one person drops a string, the web collapses, and that when one person pulls on a string, everyone can feel the pull. Discuss our interconnectedness despite our individual differences. There should not be anyone in the group who does not connect to anyone—think through this in your planning. This activity can be adapted for students.
- Draft a policy that is vertically aligned for each grade level with developmental considerations in mind
- Read "Mending Wall" by Robert Frost, and discuss the themes of the poem in light of the themes of this case. (Can be adapted for students)
  - Do good neighbors require good fences?
  - What is it that doesn't love a wall?
  - What are the boundaries that lead to better relationships and inclusivity?
  - How have we seen these boundaries called into question since the 2016 election?