

Facing Partisan Conflict: *How Social Studies Educators Can Lead Towards a Diverse Democracy*

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I am very concerned about the future of our country and our schools.... I had some kids that were screaming at each other in classes, and I'd have to come down and help the teacher—a veteran teacher, who's never had problems having discussions. The kids were just so stuck in their trenches, they weren't willing to even listen to the other side. So, we [decided], "Okay, we can't do any of our current event topics. We're going to 'ixnay' all of that." We're going to just do past things like, "Should the atomic bomb have been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Let's look at the pro and the con." We've had to ratchet it back from contemporary events.

—Amber Reynolds,¹
High School Principal
in a "Purple" Iowa community

Amber Reynolds's story is like many we have heard over the past couple of years from principals, social studies teachers, and leaders of social studies departments across the country. These conflicts amongst students reflect conflicts among adults in the broader society. The inability of "We the People" to productively manage these conflicts helps explain why 83% of Democrats and Republicans agree that: "There is a serious threat to democracy."²

Unfortunately, these troubling dynamics are having a chilling effect. Educators are now less likely to engage students in classroom discussions about controversial social issues.³ Backing away from this core mission of schooling has grave costs. It means our public schools fail to develop students' civic muscles, which are the strengths our society needs to climb out of the hole we find ourselves in.

While it's clear that social studies educators can't solve this problem on their own, it is also clear that they have a role to play. Social studies teachers must commit to educating towards a diverse democracy. A diverse democracy brings together people whose differences include partisan leanings, life experiences, histories, religious beliefs, racial identities, and sexual orientations to address common problems and build a shared future. Social studies educators can help prepare youth to pursue this goal by advancing core commitments to respectful and evidence-based dialog, informed inquiry, robust civil liberties, and the dignity of fellow participants.

Why Social Studies Teachers Can't Rely Only on Themselves?

In the present moment, characterized by so much conflict, the inclination to turn inward and focus only on one's classroom is understandable, but it strikes us as insufficient. Given increasing partisan and ideological attacks targeting schools and teachers, partnerships with school leaders will be

vital. Social studies teachers do not always think of principals as their natural allies. But increasingly, social studies teachers have become targets, and principals are positioned to provide valuable support. To do so, principals will need input from teachers on how to foreground the democratic aims of social studies. They cannot avoid important educational practices in the effort to shield schools from political controversy.

Since the challenges facing educators most often emerge from activism outside of the school, it will also be important for social studies teachers to foster relationships of trust and understanding (and, in some instances, partnerships) with parents and community-based groups that can add their voices in support of a diverse democracy. Indeed, since community priorities and professional expertise should together help shape school agendas, it is important for educators, parents, and community members to be aware of each other's perspectives. Needless to say, in environments of heightened conflict, it often will be difficult to forge such relationships. But in most settings, there are some opportunities, and it will be critically important to recognize and take advantage of them.

In what follows, we briefly explore the broad political context that makes this work both challenging and important. We then consider three priorities for social studies educators to consider as they work to advance partnerships as a means of protecting and promoting the democratic aims of education that are so vital today.

Partisan Divides and the Challenge of Educating Towards a Diverse Democracy

[I've seen a] growing divide ... pretty much down political lines [that] is making it hard to manage a school community – more than any other era in my 20 years of administrative experience.

– Utah High School Principal

The harsh rhetoric and conflict between partisans of opposing parties is not unique to the educational sphere. Polarization—which political scientists define as support for extreme views on policy issues—has grown substantially over the

past several decades.⁴ And one form of polarization, affective polarization, is particularly challenging. Affective polarization is a measure of the degree to which partisans dislike, fear, and distrust members of the opposing party.⁵ A recent study of OECD countries, found that affective polarization had increased more in the United States than in any of the 11 other countries examined.⁶ In 1978, partisans in the U.S. rated those in their own party 27.4 points higher than out-party members on a feeling thermometer (i.e., a visual tool to measure emotions). By 2020, that difference had more than doubled to 56.3 points. Indeed, as of 2019, more than 15% of Democrats and Republicans agreed that “we’d be better off as a country if large numbers of the opposing party in the public today just died.”⁷

Such strong partisan feelings exert sizable influence. For example, strong partisans of both major parties are much less likely to socialize with those in the opposing group, they are more likely to believe that the opposing group will break and manipulate rules to achieve political goals, and they seek out and believe information supporting their co-partisans much more than equally credible information that supports the position of those in the opposing party.⁸

Given the sizable increases in affective polarization, it is not surprising that there is often intense conflict when those affiliated with opposing political parties share space—as they do in many public schools. At the same time, affective polarization did not increase dramatically over the past three or four years, even though conflict around schools exploded during that period. The recent sizable increase in contention therefore is not solely caused by partisan rancor. It likely also stems from the frustration, stress, and anger many parents experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. This discontent was stoked by conservative media and redirected by right-wing groups toward public schools and their efforts to teach about race and racism and support LGBTQ+ youth. As of August 2022, PEN America reported that 36 states had introduced 137 bills designed to restrict instruction on topics such as race, gender, sexuality and U.S. history in K-12 and higher education—a 250% increase from 2021 when 22 states introduced 54 similar bills.⁹ This growth was fueled by

political mobilization, not by a change in affective polarization.

The impact of these pressures is not hard to predict, but it is striking. In a 2023 nationally representative study, 25% of teachers reported that their school or district told them to limit discussions about political and social issues. In addition, because of concern regarding conflict, 65% decided of their own accord to limit such discussions!¹⁰ This chilling effect is deeply troubling. Research has consistently shown that student engagement with informed examination and discussion of controversial issues promotes skills and commitments tied to democratic participation and, in particular, the capacity to dialogue productively across difference.¹¹ In short, it seems educators are caught in a catch-22. Although classroom based controversial issue discussion can help prepare youth for productive dialog across partisan divides, those very divides are making it much harder for educators to use that practice.

Social studies educators should not be passive in the face of these powerful social and political forces. A primary purpose of the social studies field is to prepare young people to analyze and act in ways that foster a diverse democracy. Educators can help lead school and district efforts to address the pressing needs of this current moment.

Drawing on our research, our conversations with colleagues, and on our work with schools and districts, we have identified three priorities through which social studies educators can help fortify and advance education towards a diverse democracy: (1) Framing and communicating the purpose of schools in relation to educating towards a diverse democracy; (2) Supporting professional learning relative to that purpose; and (3) Expanding opportunities for students to practice the skills of participating in a diverse democracy (see Table 1 on p. 16).

1. Framing and Communicating: *Social studies educators should work with school and district leaders, community members and youth to develop clear statements of commitment to educating towards a diverse democracy. Given how central the democratic aims of education were to the historical development of a system of public*

schooling in the United States, it is striking that the mission statements of most schools and districts remain silent about democracy. In fact, in a study we did in California, we found that only 15% of California's school districts explicitly mentioned the civic and democratic purposes of education in their mission statements.¹² There is no reason to believe such statements are more common in other states.

Of course, mentioning democracy in a mission statement guarantees little. But given the highly contentious context of many school communities, we think there are several ways statements lifting up the values of democracy and diversity can help. We argue that it is important to express commitments to a diverse democracy in a range of formats (to students, to parents, to fellow educators). Why?

First, it is vital that, when asked, educators explain the clear rationale for what they are doing. We have been struck by how many educators have told us that parents and community members have questioned the appropriateness of having students learn about controversial issues, read books about people from diverse backgrounds, or consider painful and problematic aspects of U.S. history. In these situations, educators are on firmer ground if their schools have what Robert Pondiscio and Tracey Schirra describe as "Codes of Conduct."¹³ Such statements provide an agreed upon and clear response—one endorsed by the school and, if possible, by the parent-teacher association, school board, or other civic body. It is very difficult for any of us to construct such a response on the fly.

Crafting statements of principle can be challenging. Such statements should explain why, in a society diverse in terms of religion, race, geographic context, political beliefs, ethnicity, gender identity, home language, and more, it is vital to learn about and develop respect for the humanity of those from diverse backgrounds and, in addition, to learn how to thoughtfully discuss potentially contentious issues, identifying both differences and points of agreement. (Indeed, the very process of drafting a statement can be an opportunity for diverse constituencies to build understanding and a sense of common purpose.)

In addition to helping frame the purpose

of schooling, educators must play a central role in communicating how this purpose is advanced through particular classroom practices. Fortunately, there are many high quality practices, such as Structured Academic Controversies,

Philosophical Chairs, Think Pair Share, that social studies educators can point to which enable informed discussion while helping students consider varied viewpoints. Consistent with the ideals of a diverse democracy, these practices should

Table 1. Three Strategies for Promoting Education Towards a Diverse Democracy

Strategy	Rationale	Examples of Action Steps
<p>Framing and Communicating: Social studies educators should work with school and district leaders and with community members and youth to develop clear statements of commitment to educating towards a diverse democracy.</p>	<p>To avoid vague proclamations such as, “students should not feel uncomfortable,” teachers and school leaders should articulate their professional obligation to educate towards a diverse democracy. Crafting statements can deepen and spread understanding and commitment to this goal. Such statements can also provide transparency, guide practice, promote accountability, and help communicate commitments to a sometimes-skeptical public.</p>	<p>When developing the district statement, identify:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> principles related to education towards a diverse democracy such as the value of informed and civil discourse. practices that can advance these priorities, such as Socratic Seminars and Structured Academic Controversies.
<p>Supporting Professional Learning: Social studies educators should work to expand opportunities for colleagues to develop skills for educating towards a diverse democracy.</p>	<p>Teaching in ways that develop capacities for dialog across ideological and identity differences and teaching about diverse groups and histories is difficult. Educators will benefit both from professional development and from opportunities to support one another.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish Professional Learning Communities through which teachers can share approaches, visit one another’s classrooms, and reflect on strategies. Bring in experts for sustained professional development and coaching to help teachers strengthen their content knowledge and skills related to these priorities.
<p>Expanding Opportunities for Student Participation: Social studies educators should center and recognize students’ voices and perspectives with respect to education towards a diverse democracy.</p>	<p>Not only <i>can</i> young people lead when it comes to civic and political life, they often <i>do</i>. Young people’s authentic voices sometimes can cut through the partisan battles in which many adults are heavily invested. In addition, since students frequently disagree with one another, their interaction will provide an opportunity to practice deliberation and to explore varied perspectives.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grant youth seats on both district and school leadership bodies. Support youth to facilitate conversations in their school communities about the ways their school does or could better support the ideals of a diverse democracy. Develop Youth Participatory Action Research Projects in which students examine evidence of school culture and curriculum supportive of a diverse democracy.

enable students, should they choose, to share their identities, experiences, and histories as part of the exchange.

2. Supporting Professional Learning: *Social studies educators should work to expand opportunities for colleagues to develop skills for educating toward a diverse democracy.* Even before the current rise in tensions across partisan lines, many educators were hesitant to engage students in lessons about race and diversity or about controversial political issues. They often lacked models of how to do this well and opportunities to practice such forms of instruction. Professional development and other forms of support for professional learning have always been an important means of enabling high quality implementation of these practices. Unfortunately, our recent study revealed that between 2018 and 2022, at the same time that the challenges associated with partisan divides increased, there were sharp declines in access to professional development related to supporting a diverse democracy in high schools located in Purple and Red communities across the country.¹⁴ For example, in 2018, principals in 60% of high schools in Red communities reported that their teachers received professional development on ways to teach about the history and literature of different racial and ethnic groups in the United States. By 2022, that proportion had declined to 33%. Sizable declines occurred in supports for controversial issue discussions as well.

Such findings highlight the chilling effect of political conflict when it comes to educating towards a diverse democracy. Conservative activists often state that they simply wish to guard against “indoctrination” or a supposed “woke” bias. But if this were the case, then there would be *increased* support for professional development from groups that express concerns about indoctrination. What we are seeing instead is diminished support for professional development.

Gathering the funds to provide such supports and doing so in a way that reaches most teachers will require strong school and district leadership. Thus, while there will be pushback in many contexts, it is vital that social studies educators work with their principals and other district leaders to ensure the availability of these opportunities.

One challenge in supporting professional learning for a diverse democracy is that often our teaching force does not reflect the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the student body. It is critically important to work towards a more representative teaching force. In addition, professional learning for a diverse democracy can benefit from focusing on ways to tap into the community cultural wealth and funds of knowledge that exists amongst students and within the broader community.¹⁵

3. Expanding Opportunities for Student Participation: *Social studies educators should center and recognize students’ enormous capacities to be leaders in this work.* Educators often focus on what they can do and what actions they should take. That’s understandable. Clearly, educators must play a sizable role. At the same time, in focusing on their own actions, they risk missing the potential of youth voice and youth agency outside the classroom. Extra-curricular leadership, for instance, can create powerful opportunities for students to promote a diverse democracy and to develop needed skills and experiences.

For example, in one California district committed to fostering youth voice and engagement, student leaders were offered the opportunity to present at a school board meeting and share a sense of their needs. Before students could begin speaking, angry adults confronted them, claiming their school taught Critical Race Theory and heckling the students for wearing masks. The student representative on the school board took the microphone and said, “We’re all wearing masks because we’ve all lost family members. This isn’t about you. This is about us. This is our night to present. This is about our school, about our program. So [you] need to be quiet.” It worked. Back at school, the representative told her classmates, “If we don’t speak up, others will for us.”¹⁶

Not every interchange will be as profound, but creating contexts for young people to exercise authentic voice both models and teaches democracy. There are such opportunities in our schools, but not nearly enough.

It is also helpful to consider how students develop unique capacities for participating in a diverse democracy in different sorts of groups. For

example, in groups that center young people's identities and shared interests, students learn to talk in public about their own stories and articulate what they see as their particular community's interests. In groups that bring together young people from different backgrounds and different beliefs, students learn to listen and forge empathy and build coalitions. Robert Putnam describes these different experiences as related to bonding and bridging social capital.¹⁷

This Work is Essential

We recognize that even as social studies educators have a lot on their plates and are teaching in an extremely stressful and difficult time, we are calling on the field to do even more. And on top of that, such work is politically complex. Historically, educators have not taken partisan stances in their classrooms, and most have avoided participating politically in deliberations about controversial educational policies. In the current moment, democratic aims—long the beneficiaries of bi-partisan support—have become a target of partisan groups. As a result, it will often not be possible to avoid the perception by some that one is behaving in a partisan manner when one embraces long-standing commitments to a diverse democracy. Nor will it be possible to affect the kind of change that is needed if educators work alone or if they focus solely on their essential instructional roles. Thus, an expanded leadership role for educators is required.

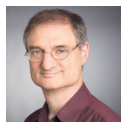
Framing and communicating the purpose of education for the broader community, advocating for professional learning, and expanding extra-curricular opportunities for students to practice participation in a diverse democracy will require partnerships with a range of stakeholders. Social studies educators will need to join with other teachers, work with school and district leaders, converse with community members, and create spaces in which students have opportunities to express their priorities. Not all these steps must be taken at once, but it is essential to start walking.

To be sure, many of those leading for a diverse democracy, in a time of toxic polarization, are going to experience discomfort, exhaustion, and stress. Unfortunately, for countless dedicated educators, that's nothing new. And in this highly politicized context, where differing stakeholders don't always share the same priorities or values, victories will often be partial, building trust will be challenging, and conflict, at times, unavoidable and harsh. Yet as community organizers Kelly Hayes and Mariame Kaba remind us, we cannot reshape our social and political realities if we only speak or work with those from like-minded backgrounds with whom we already agree. Pointing out that our collective future is at stake, Hayes and Kaba ask: "How much discomfort is the whole world worth?" The corollary for social studies educators might be: How much discomfort is a diverse democracy worth?¹⁸ ■

Some educators may wish to partner with or work for groups that are organizing, developing resources, and providing legal support, locally, regionally, or nationally to push back against restrictive and anti-democratic constraints on schools and to push towards education for a diverse democracy. Such groups include: Heal Together (www.healtogether.org), Stop Moms For Liberty (www.stopmomsforliberty.com), Our Schools USA (www.ourschoolsusa.org), Defense of Democracy (<https://defenseofdemocracy.org>), Honesty for Ohio Education (www.honestyforohioeducation.org), edjustice (www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/racial-social-justice), Student Action Network for Equity (<https://seekcommonground.org/sane>), Campaign for our Shared Future (www.campaignsharedfuture.org), Learn from History (<https://learnfromhistory.org>), It's our Turn (www.itsourturn.org)

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
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3. Sy Doan, Elizabeth D. Steiner, Rakesh Pandey, and Ashley Woo, *Teacher Well-Being and Intentions to Leave: Findings from the 2023 State of the American Teacher Survey* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2023).
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5. S. Iyengar, G. Sood, and Y. Lelkes, "Affect, not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2012): 405–431.
6. Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M. Shapiro, "Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization," *Review of Economics and Statistics* (2022): 1–60, https://doi.org/10.1162/rest_a_01160.
7. N. Kalmoe and L. Mason, "Lethal Mass Partisanship: Prevalence, Correlates, and Electoral Consequences (Paper presentation at American Political Science Association's Annual Meeting, Boston, 2018).
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9. J.C. Young and J. Friedman, *America's Censored Classrooms* (August 17, 2022), <https://pen.org/report/americas-censored-classrooms>.
10. Doan et al., *Teacher Well-Being and Intentions to Leave*.
11. D. E. Hess and P. McAvoy, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* (Routledge, 2015); Judith Torney-Purta, "The School's Role in Developing Civic Engagement: A Study of Adolescents in Twenty-Eight Countries," *Applied Developmental Science* 6, no. 4 (October 1, 2002): 203–12.
12. J. Rogers et al., *Reclaiming the Democratic Purpose of California's Public Schools*. Research Report (Leveraging Equity & Access in Democratic Education Initiative at UCLA & UC Riverside, 2020).
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14. J. Rogers et al., *Educating for a Diverse Democracy: The Chilling Role of Political Conflict in Blue, Purple, and Red Communities* (UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, 2022).
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16. J. Rogers et al., *Educating for a Diverse Democracy*.
17. R. D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Touchstone Books/Simon & Schuster, 2000).
18. Kelly Hayes and Mariame Kaba, "How Much Discomfort Is the Whole World Worth?" *Boston Review* (Sept. 6, 2023).



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