Managing the Challenges of the Political Season: Bullying Prevention & Response

A Resource Manual For Students

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Introduction

As we begin the school year, we should be aware of the impact this year's election may have on our Pre-K12 schools. Regardless of one's politics, heated political rhetoric has the potential to increase levels of fear and anxiety among students of all ages, especially among ethnic, racial and linguistic minorities, children with disabilities, and LGBTQ youth. Heated political discussion, fear and anxiety are not limited to home, but according to recent reports comes with children to school and may be identified as bullying, harassment or discrimination (Costello, 2016). Such behavior violates Iowa's Anti-Bullying and Anti-Harassment law and may violate federal protections provided by Title IV of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Title II of the 1990 ADA Act, Section 504, 1973 Rehabilitation Act and Title IX, enforced by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights.

As educators, you are critically important to modeling behavior and providing instruction to your fellow educators, students, families and communities on how to create safe and supportive environments in which *all* students can learn and engage in civic dialogue in a responsible manner. The following information and resources may be shared with your school board, administrators, colleagues, students, families and community members.

This political season is different.

This political season is impacting young people in a manner we have not seen in previous election years.

> *"Teachers report an increase in anger and 'acting out' among students and a decreased ability to engage in civil discourse. Discussions turn into shouting matches, verbal hostility and sometimes-even fights... 'Students have become very hostile to opposing points of view, regardless of the topic. Any division now elicits anger and personal attacks' a Jefferson, Georgia High School Teacher wrote, 'Any division now elicits anger and personal attacks.'"*

- Southern Poverty Law Center Study, 2016

> *"Our history is littered with examples of political bullying. Political candidates are constantly given a free pass to act in a way that we would never tolerate in our own children."*

- Jenn Savedge, 2016

> *"Regardless of one's politics, the impact of this year's political rhetoric on K 12 schools is huge. It has produced increasing levels of fear and anxiety among students of all ages. Fear levels are becoming especially high among ethnic, racial and linguistic minority, and LGBTQ youth. Perception is reality. Skin color, clothing, accent, religious beliefs, perceived sexual orientation or identity all play into rhetoric-based "reality". Many students have been targeted; many, regardless of their place of birth, are worried about being deported. Teachers have noted an increase in incidents of harassment, intimidation and/or bullying directed at students whose backgrounds are targeted by the rhetoric."*

- Mike Donlin, School Safety Center, WA

"Iowa is not devoid of issues in schools and communities during this political season. One [story from central Iowa](#) focuses on student language and behaviors at a sporting event. This story ended when administration, and students directly reached out to make amends and heal the harm. At another community in western Iowa students and community [protested the use of their high school](#) by a presidential candidate they felt had [caused racial issues with his political rhetoric](#). In a third instance [remarks by an Iowa US Representative](#) at the national political convention led to a document published in the Des Moines Register, ["A Teachable Moment."](#) 100 Iowa Social Studies educators signed the document. Very recently a small town in western Iowa hosted a parade where a [float depicted a presidential candidate in prison garb and in a cage](#). Those attending the parade were handed water filled balloons to throw at the person in the cage. It is entirely possible you will experience repercussions from these events as the political season continues to heat up. **"**

- Penny Bisignano, Iowa Bullying Prevention Specialist

Student and Student Leader Resources

Preventing political-based bullying means getting students engaged in their communities and in the civic process. The following resources are meant for student leaders, student clubs, and can be used in the classroom setting.   These are potential ideas and resources to help students see their part in the political process. We strongly encourage you to allow the students to also come up with any of their own ideas.

Student Clubs

Student clubs must be student-driven, student-initiated, and student-led. These resources for various student clubs are potential ideas. Students must be involved in any process including decisions of what activities to implement. Student clubs may include National Honor Society, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), Student Council, political party clubs and other community-based student clubs. Here is a list of resources they may be helpful to Student Clubs at your school.

- Teaching Tolerance http://www.tolerance.org/
- Anti-Defamation League http://www.adl.org/
- Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) http://www.glsen.org/
- Iowa Safe Schools – GSAs http://www.iowasafeschools.org/
- American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) https://www.aclu.org/
- First Amendment Center http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/
- National Association of Student Councils https://www.nasc.us/?SSO=true
- National Honor Society https://www.nhs.us/?SSO=true
- Fellowship of Christian Athletes https://www.fca.org

Project Citizen

[Project Citizen](#) is an interdisciplinary curricular program for middle, secondary, and postsecondary students, youth organizations, and adult groups that promote competent

and responsible participation in local and state government. The program helps participants learn how to monitor and influence public policy. In the process, they develop support for democratic values and principles, tolerance, and feelings of political efficacy.

Service Learning

Service Learning is a teaching and **learning** strategy that integrates meaningful community **service** with instruction and reflection to enrich the **learning** experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities. (Learn and Serve America National **Service Learning** Clearinghouse)

Debate Watching

Political debates can provide important learning opportunities. When election time comes around—whether it is a presidential election or a local contest for mayor, city council member, governor or member of Congress—these debates give teachers an opening to explore candidates, issues and the electoral process with their students.

Debate Watching Guide – Anti-Defamation League

But what about our traditional mock election?

Many schools recognize Election Day by participating in a school-wide "election" between the two presidential candidates. Given the divisive political rhetoric this campaign season, which can leave students and school staff feeling frustrated and unsafe, schools should give special consideration to holding such a school-wide event.

Make it high quality. Schools who feel strongly that it is important to have students participate in a mock election, need to ensure the use of high quality lessons which frame the election as an act of civic participation rather than one based on hateful political rhetoric or parental political preferences. In order to do this, we suggest utilizing the following resources and best practices:

- Use primary sources. Ensure that students are exploring actual text or video of the political candidates, not just what they've heard or been told specific to any one candidate's position. C-SPAN provides primary sources through the C-SPAN Classroom Campaign 2016
- Encourage students to first determine their political positions, and then find a candidate who stands for these beliefs.
- Ensure that all elections are discussed, not simply the presidential election. This can include local, state and federal races.
- iCIVICS teaches students how government works by having them experience it directly. Through our games, the player steps into any role – a judge, a member of Congress, a community activist fighting for local change, even the President of the United States – and does the job they do. Educational video games allow for concepts to happen to us. They convey information while teaching skills for effective civic engagement.
- The goal of any mock election is to encourage civic discourse among students. Framing any election related activities to be specific to students exploring multiple perspectives on any issue while being held to high

- Standards of discussion and debate. http://www.cspanclassroom.org/Campaign-2016.aspx http://www.c-spanclassroom.org/Campaign-2016.aspx

Or, skip it altogether. Given that the outcome of school based elections are often decided by the majority, schools should be especially cautious of further marginalizing students with non-dominant identities. It would be especially troubling for students who are experiencing fear or anxiety about the election and how the outcome may influence them and their family. In place of a mock election, other topics relating to voting could be explored, such as:

- Facing History and Ourselves provides a number of resources specific to democracy and civic participation.
- Explore the history and current state of voting rights in the United States.

Conclusion

Bullying, Harassment and Discrimination are behaviors have been documented for years. While these types of behaviors do not originate in the heated political rhetoric of an election year, they may be amplified. The "bully pulpit" of politics is no longer reserved for ideologies and issues; and instead has taken aim at individuals and identities. As students repeat and reinforce behaviors modeled to them in the political arena, educators must be prepared to help students understand how the bad behaviors of politicians fit – or don't - into the school rules and scope of civic discourse; ensuring all students and school staff have a safe learning environment.

If you have questions or would like further resources, please contact:

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