Mentoring for Civil Discourse:
Tips and Tricks

BY SARAH LANE

Administrators, instructional coaches, mentors, and other educational leaders play a crucial role in cultivating a positive school culture that actively integrates and promotes civil discourse. By providing targeted support and guidance, you can create a learning environment where respectful dialogue and diverse perspectives are embraced.

The following are strategies to help initiate and sustain the meaningful development of civil discourse practices over time.

- **Begin on a small scale.** Support staff and students in gaining confidence and establishing a foundation before moving into more challenging topics. Encourage teachers to begin with small-scale activities that build community and focus on nonpolitical or less complex issues, such as these discussion starters. Set leadership goals for the gradual increase of civil discourse strategies in your school and a long-term vision for schoolwide practices. You don't need to wait until the start of a new school year. By moving forward now, you can create an early impact and lay the groundwork for meaningful progress. You can use this road map and checklist to support your planning.

- **Tie civil discourse to content and standards.** Civil discourse naturally integrates with and extends into content across all subjects, engaging students actively with the material and developing a deeper connection to their learning. There are many ways to connect academic content standards with discourse on any topic. Connect civil discourse practices to what is already adopted and required or as part of ongoing classroom best practices, such as social-emotional learning standards or goals, speaking and listening skills in English language arts, foundational skills in social studies, and vocabulary or dialogue practices in STEM. In doing so, you allow students to take ownership of their learning as they apply critical thinking and engage in respectful dialogue.

- **Provide resources to staff** . Offer teachers access to resources that support civil discourse, such as Sphere's Principles of Civil Discourse Primer, the Middle School Toolkit, or introductory lessons for civil discourse, such as "What Is Civil Discourse?" Consider adding resources to a dedicated staff resources webpage or featuring them in ongoing staff newsletters. Use a "Curriculum Corner" or "Civil Discourse Corner" in the newsletter to spotlight useful tools and resources and share highlights from the school community.

- **Inform and engage stakeholders.** Be proactive and gain buy-in with parents, community members, and other school stakeholders by sharing the school's civil discourse practices. Include sharing why civil discourse is important to academic and social-emotional development. You can use, adopt, or share Sphere's examples of norms or Sphere's acronym AWARE (assert, wonder, accept, respect, establish). Regularly communicate the benefits of these practices for student development and how they tie to the school's mission and vision, helping to build a foundation of trust. Share these at a back-to-school night or feature examples of quality discourse practices and civic culture in a community newsletter or website. Offer teachers support in sending parent letters at the beginning of the year.

- **Support instructional collaboration and coaching.** When teachers express interest in deeper collaboration, try implementing high-impact coaching cycles that include identifying areas for growth coupled with assessment practices. Offer opportunities for collaborative planning, co-teaching, and reflection on lessons that embed civil discourse

strategies. Use walkthroughs and goal-setting tools to support this practice of partnered continuous improvement.

- **Encourage peer observations.** Offer voluntary opportunities for teachers to observe colleagues. Teachers can observe how civil discourse is introduced, lessons that build in civil discourse strategies, and how fellow teachers manage student discussions. Use peer walkthroughs to provide valuable insights and foster a culture of shared learning.

- **Leverage technology.** Encourage using an adopted learning management system to host student discussion boards and resources to prepare students for in-classroom discussions or extend civil discourse beyond the classroom. Provide technological support for self-evaluation, such as allowing teachers to borrow cameras or tripods to record class discussions for self-reflection on facilitating student discussions. During coaching cycles, reflect on how technology is supporting civil discourse skills.

- **Advocate for civil discourse and address concerns promptly.** Advocate for the civil discourse practices your teachers and school are implementing. Be proactive in addressing concerns from teachers, students, or stakeholders should they arise. Be prepared to defend the "why" with clear talking points, such as how it fosters critical thinking, empathy, and active citizenship in students. Help resolve conflicts in healthy ways that increase understanding of adopted norms. Share your work with other school leaders, district leadership, or others in your network to increase impact and awareness.

- **Invest time in professional development.** Provide ongoing professional development opportunities focused on civil discourse practices. This could include Sphere on the Road professional development, at no cost to you. Professional learning time also includes setting aside intentional time for educators to examine resources and collaboration time to build civil discourse practices into planning. Genuinely acknowledge and amplify the teachers' autonomy, creativity, effort, and successes along the way.

- **Be open to feedback.** This is the most critical component of any action taken. As you engage in any or all practices, critically reflect to identify and dismantle barriers that hinder dialogue. Teachers must be supported, empowered, and given opportunities to provide feedback. This allows for an adaptive, ongoing cycle of change and fosters a space for respectful conversations. This reflective leadership not only strengthens the relationships among staff but also models the value of civil discourse for the school.