



SPHERE

Fostering Civil Discourse and Diverse Viewpoints for Every Classroom

Why Civil Discourse? Shape a School Culture of Respect and Open Dialogue

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School and district leaders are uniquely positioned to implement interdisciplinary civil discourse as schoolwide practices that empower educators and allow for each student's voice to be heard. By doing so, leaders build positive school cultures where students and staff alike bridge diverse viewpoints and have space for discussion, understanding, and reflection.



Leaders Transform Learning Environments and Improve Trajectories

Effective school leaders cultivate meaningful relationships with staff members grounded in emotional and professional support. Leaders build staff confidence and foster classroom success by meeting teachers' professional and psychological needs through supportive practices. This increases academic achievement and teacher retention (Martinez & McAbee, 2020) and directly strengthens the implementation of civil discourse practices.

School leaders sometimes encounter barriers in implementation and have areas where they can further strengthen their support for these initiatives. Teachers often cite a lack of support from school and district leadership as barriers to implementing civil discourse strategies. In the State of the American Teacher Survey (RAND Corporation, 2023), 40 percent of teachers shared that they had supportive school leaders, and 25 percent of teachers shared that school or district leaders have directed them to limit discussions about political and social issues in class. Teachers report limiting discussions on these issues, with 65 percent of teachers reporting that they had limited or omitted these types of discussions in class. This self-censorship is often related to discomfort or a lack of knowledge on the topic, fear of pushback, or a lack of support from the administration or other stakeholders.

Transformative, adaptive school leadership can turn these trends around, positively impacting their school and community. Leadership can foster a culture of trust and offer resources and professional development, ensuring teachers are equipped and confident to handle challenging topics and discussions.

By investing in civil discourse practices and addressing teachers' concerns, school leaders can empower educators to facilitate civil discourse without fear of backlash, thus promoting a more open and engaged learning environment for all students.

Teachers desire leaders who actively serve as their advocates, offering guidance and encouragement to support their success and growth.

Positive Impacts on School Achievement

Communication skills and discourse strategies positively impact school achievement. These skills are interdisciplinary and can be developed in any classroom: used within building classroom community, content-connected discussions, and a range of discussions on complex and pressing issues of today, dependent on age and subject appropriateness. Civil discourse is also used in unrehearsed moments, where students navigate complex, unplanned conversations. The principles of civil discourse may continue to be explored in the [Principles of Civil Discourse Primer](#).

By supporting civil discourse practices, you are . . .

- **Boosting student performance.** Evidence from more than 20 international studies showed that engagement in high-quality classroom discussions improved overall student performance in core subjects, as measured by national and global exams (Alexander, 2012). While all students benefited, students from multilingual backgrounds appeared to have increased benefits. Research demonstrated that lessons in civil discourse and oracy—defined as proficiency in oral expression and comprehension—significantly improved the spoken English skills of multilingual students, leading to increased confidence and engagement in all educational areas (Kotler et al., 2001).
- **Aligning with school improvement goals.** Knowing their voice will be heard and respected increases a student's sense of belonging. This is a core component of civil discourse, and it develops a strong sense of community and buy-in, which can support increased attendance and engagement. This can help reduce in-school conflicts and increase student voice and academic outcomes.
- **Developing critical thinking and empathy.** Civil discourse encourages students to engage thoughtfully with opposing viewpoints and better understand multiple perspectives. This allows students to critically analyze facts and reason while also developing an understanding of human perspectives.
- **Encouraging reflective practices.** Dialogue, debate, and respectful disagreement enhance learning across all subject areas. These practices develop student leaders as they reflect and grow in their practices.
- **Supporting the empowerment of school staff.** Supporting civil discourse as a leader promotes trust and collaboration, as staff members feel backed by leadership in addressing challenging issues, knowing they have the support to guide students in critical thinking and dialogue.

When communities have limitations on discussing divisive concepts, educators can still be empowered by school leaders to teach confidently within standards and curriculum while fostering meaningful civil discourse. Civil discourse can be integrated across subjects as a best practice that is standards-aligned and supports student growth in critical thinking, empathy, and respectful engagement. Leaders can reinforce that civil discourse is not about promoting specific viewpoints but about helping students learn how to engage thoughtfully with multiple perspectives.

We can empower the next generation to respect diverse viewpoints and, as a result, contribute to the positive development of civic culture in the United States.

Resources Designed for Mentorship and Collaboration

The resources in this collection were developed with educational leaders in mind. The tools are suitable not only for administrators but also for instructional coaches, teacher mentors, department chairs, or even teacher colleagues wanting to support one another in developing best practices with a peer's support. Importantly, these efforts do not require additional time—they can be integrated into a school leader's regular, day-to-day work, enhancing schoolwide practices without adding to already full schedules. Resources are designed to help support classroom and schoolwide practices for civil discourse through collaborative partnerships with educators.

Civil discourse within classrooms aligns with best practices within evaluation, such as student ownership of learning, student discourse, and advanced reasoning and thinking skills. However, building civil discourse practices with educators should be within relationship building and development outside of formal evaluation processes. This builds trust and practices that will set a foundation for student success. Tips and tricks, walkthrough tools, activities, examples, and other resources are shared in the spirit of collaboration with teachers in moving a school community forward to communicate respectfully in a polarized world.

To partner with you in this critical work, Sphere Education Initiatives offers additional hands-on support with working with school staff and high-quality professional development at no cost.