

Guidelines for Calming the Post-Election Chaos

None of us was prepared for the strident reactions of the few to the outcome of the elections. Most voters on both sides were taking matters to heart, trying to make sense of which candidate would make a better world for them. No one voted for a candidate in hopes of creating chaos and providing the anarchists the opportunity to infiltrate peaceful demonstrations and to break windows and threaten drivers stuck in traffic jams. These threatening behaviors are the actions of a small minority, but if we just stand by, it empowers them to have more influence and presence.

The chaos and demonstrations give us one way of measuring the fear and venom that resides within our greater communities. Another measure of this is the uncountable numbers of parents asking how to help their children to sleep or to otherwise cope. This is large and long-lasting, so our response isn't about just what to say to students today and tomorrow; this is about how we craft our response for the coming months and years.

In general, there are a few things adults can consider.

- America has had dark times before, and although it is terribly difficult when in the midst of them, we have come out of them to rise to a greater place of tolerance. To do so required that good people stand up and take action. As unjust as our nation was during segregation, we made huge advances. The McCarthy era. Kent State. It won't be this way forever, but who we are as a nation when we get to the other side of this depends on our thoughtful, deliberate, consistent, ongoing action.
- Although it feels like losing ground, we won't slip back to where we were.
- Any time people feel threatened, and because some must maintain hope toward a better future, taking action provides immediate sense of agency or the beginning of some sense of control. We need to help youth feel a sense of control.
- Schools and all adults need to hold onto expectations that hate speech, vitriol, and bigotry are not acceptable. We also need to watch, though, that how we discipline youth engaged in this doesn't just drive those angry sentiments underground only to emerge when students are walking home or places less protected than school. Take thoughtful action toward helping students overcome hate and cultivate respect and acceptance.
- We have to recognize that what is needed to address the fears of some youth and the angst of many is more than what can be covered in one set of guidelines or managed with a couple of sessions of conversations in classrooms. This is the beginning of an ongoing effort to make American whole.
- Keep track of those students who are seen as aggressors and have adults check in with them quietly to encourage them to become involved in projects. Enlist their aid in ways that draws them into the school community in positive activities with other peers.

For school staff, parents and care-givers for youth: We know that youth need to feel safe to learn, so all adults must take steps to know which students feel threatened and take immediate steps to provide for their sense of safety.

- All incidents of hateful language, threatening actions, intimidation or bullying need to be reported and action taken immediately.

- Teachers and parents need to reinforce the expectations of mutual respect and outline swift consequences that will be given to offenders.
- Create safe zones in the school. Consider having staff wear safety pins visibly, indicating their willingness to help anyone feel safe about anything, including walking with someone to the bus, standing up in their defense, or helping them address issues. Share with students this idea, which is new to us, but was used following the Brexit vote when minorities were attacked and caring people wanted to provide a sense of safety and support.
- Our greatest detriment is for those of good intent to stand by rather than take action.
- Provide youth with language for labeling what we see. Identify “hate speech” as hate speech. Identify their behaviors and actions with language that can also help targeted people identify why it feels threatening for some.

For youth who are threatened by current events and behaviors:

- Finding a sense of community is helpful. Find others with whom you are comfortable and agree to walk one another home or through the cafeteria. Then enlarge your circle to others who feel threatened and support them as well.
- Mobilize. We all feel better when we’re doing something, rather than sitting on our hands and feeling helpless. Get together and make posters of positive slogans.
- For middle and high schoolers, inform school administration and others who have the power to make changes. Write letters to your legislators. Generate as many thoughtful letters as you can.

For youth who are not in targeted groups:

- The Safety Pin movement: Following Brexit, many in the UK wore a safety pin as a public identifier to let those who might feel vulnerable know, “I will walk with you or sit with you or stand with you if you feel threatened.” Students who are willing to help a student who feels threatened could do this. Wear a safety pin to let others know that you are willing to walk them to the bus or through the cafeteria or get help if the threat is pressing. It is about standing up rather than standing by.
- Form action groups to join the efforts of those who are threatened. Generate all the ideas you can as you listen to those students who are under threat, and find ways to empower them as well as to take the message to your whole school.
- It only takes a small minority of students engaging in hate speech and aggression to change school climate. But that only happens if the majority fail to act or remain silent. Stand with those who need your support!
- Use your social influence with other students. Widen the circle of those who are willing to stand up to this aggression in any way they’re willing. There are a range of possibilities – using Facebook, in the moment surrounding those who feel vulnerable en masse.
- You might consider developing your own political muscle and participate more actively in your school’s governance and that of our country. Write letters to your legislators.

The school needs to provide the means for anyone to give information about aggressive and intimidating behaviors, and an anonymous means needs to be one option.