

Averting the Next Civil War: Can We Have a Truce in the School Culture Wars?

How conservatives and moderates can restore sound education in embattled schools

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October, 21, 2022

Educational neutrality, which I flesh out in this article, may be the only realistic path forward in conflicted school districts. It will not resolve all the issues that concern parents, but it is something that most conservatives and moderates can agree on. Rather than simply demanding the cessation of objectionable materials and behaviors by educators, this proposal offers a positive plan to fill the vacuum and restore content-based education.

America has reached an impasse. It is clear that there is an unbridgeable gap between traditional American values, shaped largely by a historically, Christian culture, and the Progressive design for our future.

There is no reconciling the Founders belief in the inherent equality of all people (“all men are created equal”), which is intended to propel us towards a colorblind society, and identity politics which establishes hierarchies in society based on skin color, sex, gender, etc. ‘White oppressors’ must either yield to the demands of ‘oppressed minorities,’ or be swept away by the emerging social revolution. There is no middle ground.

Seething beneath the surface of this civilizational conflict is the specter of violence which has erupted with increasing frequency. On the Left, the [George Floyd riots](#) killed or injured dozens of people, resulted in thousands of arrests, and inflicted at least \$2 billion in property damage across the nation. On the Right, the January 6, [Capital riot](#) resulted in over 250 felony charges. Most are still awaiting trial.

Conservatives and Progressives can no longer agree on the nature and purpose of public education. Conservatives stress content, critical thinking, and patriotism. Progressives emphasize ‘Social Emotional Learning,’ equity, diversity, and overthrowing the ‘dominant white culture.’ Is it any wonder that our schools have become a microcosm of the culture wars?

Nevertheless, there are two things conservatives and Progressives can agree upon: First, we live in a fractured society where sharp, irreconcilable differences exist. Second, schools need to create an environment where all students are treated respectfully so learning can continue.

To that end, schools must decide whether their role is to educate children as social activists, which will ignite more conflict, or teach children how to live with one another peacefully in a divided society. For most people who live outside the narrow confines of the educational community, the choice is obvious. As Martin Luther King, Jr. warned, we must learn to live together as brothers, or we will perish together as fools.

In order to foster a culture of respect and kindness where learning can take place, schools need to adopt a new (or, rather, *old*) philosophy of education—one that is suited to the divided society in which we live. *The goal should be to remove schools from the cultural battlefield and position them in neutral territory.* Scaling down the level of hostility is the only way American, public education can hope to be effective and relevant for *all* children.

The concept of neutrality has deep historical roots in America. Our Constitutional system is based on the assumption that impartiality can be achieved in some measure, given sufficient checks and balances. For example, our judicial system is built on an adversarial process which entertains evidence that both supports and opposes accusations against the defendant. Allowing both sides to be heard is the first step toward achieving an unbiased outcome.

Likewise, neutrality in education necessitates that *due consideration be given in the classroom and in school culture to different sides of societal controversies, in an age-appropriate way*. Neutrality, in this sense, does not entail the avoidance of differences, but respectful (rather than hostile) engagement. In other words, a return to civil discourse.

This approach will not be embraced warmly by most activist educators. Consequently, educational neutrality can only succeed by becoming a matter of school policy. On the negative side, this will necessitate the cessation of certain attitudes, practices, and methods—deeply entrenched in the educational community—which throw gasoline on an already raging, cultural fire. On the positive side, it will require teaching process skills which will enable students to cope with conflict and live side by side in a divided society.

What Teachers and Administrators Should *Not* Do:

- Choose sides on political and moral issues that sharply divide American society. These include abortion, gender, sexuality, identity politics, collective justice, Critical Race Theory, and interpretations of American history.
- Use biased and age-inappropriate sources in the classroom which present only one side of a controversy.
- Use the classroom, school activities, school media, and school grounds as a platform for pushing political activism and ideological agendas.
- Attempt to shape a student's belief or self-perception regarding sex, gender, politics, identity politics, Critical Race Theory, etc.
- Engage in personal assessments to determine a student's psychological or emotional state relative to sex, religion, gender, or race.
- Withhold information from parents about their child.
- Undermine or oppose parental authority, parental rights, and parental values, morals, and religion.

What Teachers and Administrators *Should* Do:

- Use unbiased, age-appropriate, academic sources in the classroom, or sources which faithfully teach different sides of controversies that sharply divide American society.
- Teach the individual rights and equality of all people, which are protected under the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, without regard for race, gender, ethnicity, or sexual preference.
- Teach students to respect the right of others to speak and act according to their beliefs.
- Teach students tolerance—how to show consideration for people with whom they disagree.
- Teach students how to resolve societal conflicts without intimidation and violence.
- Teach students how to exercise self-control in defeat and magnanimity in victory
- Teach students relational skills such as discussion, debate, and civil discourse.
- Teach students critical thinking skills which will enable them to analyze and assess conflicting ideological, political, historical, and moral, claims.
- Create an educational culture in which all students can freely express their beliefs without fear—in the classroom, through school activities, through school media, and on school grounds.

Neither side will be entirely happy with this compromise. Conservatives cannot count on schools to be incubators of patriotism and American exceptionalism. Progressives cannot employ students as proxies in their battle for social justice and their mission to eradicate traditional views of gender. Educators, administrators, and parents on both sides will be forced to conduct their cultural wars off campus.

Progressives must come to grips with the fact that tolerance and respect do not entail agreement, much less advocacy. Conservatives, must realize that they cannot fully protect their children from the radical and immoral beliefs inherent in certain worldviews or espoused by other students.

Neutrality will not be a panacea for every school-related problem. Though concepts like gender fluidity cannot be *promoted* by schools that are committed to neutrality, thorny, practical issues arising from students who identify as transgender still need to be addressed. These include the use of bathrooms, participation in sports, and preferred pronouns. Finding a *neutral* resolution to these challenges, one that respects the rights every student, will require considerable effort and, perhaps, compromise. Nevertheless, a foundational commitment to neutrality is the first step in demilitarizing inflammatory, academic content in the classroom, and authoritarian school culture.

It would be naïve, of course, to suggest that any school can achieve complete neutrality. But, in my experience, the majority of parents, especially moderates and conservatives, would prefer this trajectory to the escalating rancor that infects our schools. Unfortunately, most school districts will reject neutrality out of hand. In their view, neutrality is only a cover for perpetuating past injustices, which they are committed to erasing from society.

But, if the civic goal of education is to *affirm the rights of all people, including minorities, teach respect for every person, and produce a tolerant society*, then the Progressive educational agenda, which thrives on identity politics, is not only superfluous to the program proposed here, but has proven to be destructive of those ends.

By rejecting neutrality and refusing to remove their schools from the cultural battlefield, school boards, teachers, and administrators publicly signal their intent to indoctrinate rather than educate students. Siding with Progressive politics exposes their underlying contempt for the beliefs of moderate and conservative students, and their families.

The merits of neutrality are compelling. Nevertheless, parents and taxpayers will need to push hard if they want to move the needle back toward the center. The only hope of forcing such change, in most districts, will depend on a *broad coalition of moderates and conservatives*. From teacher colleges, to administrators, to school boards, American education is financially and ideologically invested in Progressive education and will not yield control without a protracted conflict. For the sake of our children and the preservation of civil society, this is a struggle in which we must engage and must prevail.

William DiPuccio has been teaching history, religion, and science for over four decades and has authored two, recent ebooks, *The War On America's Founding Principles: How Progressives are Dismantling America One Plank at a Time*, and *America's Culture Wars: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Both books can be downloaded for free from his blog, [Science Et Cetera](#).