

In times of division, strategic communication matters



BY ASHLEY BURNS AND MANNY RIVERA

As advocacy communications professionals who work with educators, one truth is constant in our current conversations with superintendents, principals, teachers, parents, and youth advocates: Education conversations today are riddled with more land mines than ever before.

Only 18 months ago, our most common communications challenge was helping education leaders and policymakers understand the concept and value of systemic change. Today, simply mentioning race or inequity can become kindling in a flammable context. It may ignite a parent group, unravel a school board meeting, or spark a community protest.

Words have power. Fortunately,

this means that intentional messaging — coupled with curiosity and a willingness to learn — has the power to change hearts and minds for the benefit of students. So what messages are effective in advocating for inclusive, equitable learning environments without sowing deeper divisions in our communities or feeding the conflict-hungry news cycle?

In our work at RALLY, an issue-focused communications firm, we attend focus groups, analyze quantitative messaging research, and engage with different audiences online to help us look across the U.S. and across communication channels to identify patterns and strategies that work.

We find that four communications principles consistently help education

and equity advocates navigate challenging waters, whether you are trying to de-escalate a situation with a concerned parent or convince your colleagues to hold fast to their equity commitments. These principles transcend regional and political differences as well as urban, rural, and suburban contexts:

- Ask thoughtful questions.
- Lead with your values.
- Seek common ground.
- Consider the context and choose the right messenger.

ASK THOUGHTFUL QUESTIONS TO OPEN THE DOOR FOR ASPIRATION.

As the racial reckoning of 2020 and the subsequent backlash continue to reverberate in and outside of schools,



discourse around race, identity, and equity is front and center. Although this can create an opportunity for positive change, coupled with the evolving pandemic challenges, tough conversations become increasingly emotional and, in some cases, irrational.

This isn't helpful for anyone. Think about your dinner table as a metaphor: In an emotionally charged conversation, being defensive, argumentative, or preachy does not typically yield the most productive conversation. The same is true in schools.

Assuming you are in a conversation with someone who has an earnest concern, you can head off or decrease that defensiveness by addressing their concern with a clarifying question. Asking questions can lower the temperature, help preserve your energy, and also help guide the conversation so you can better understand the root of

their concern. A question you might consider is, "I can tell you're concerned, so what is it that you truly want for your child?" More often than not, their answer will open the door for you to share how you want the same thing for students and how the steps you are taking will help achieve that for all children.

If a parent lobbies an accusation about something happening in the school, seek clarity by asking, "Where are you seeing that [accusation] happening in our school? Your child's classroom?" Often, people are parroting what they heard on TV or read in a Facebook group even though it's not actually happening (or at least not in their child's school).

This question is also an opening for you to share what you are aspiring to create for all young people: a classroom environment where everyone feels

welcome, inspired, and able to learn life skills like critical thinking and empathy.

LEAD WITH VALUES SO YOU DON'T GET TRAPPED IN A FUTILE DEBATE.

While it might be tempting to get into debates about what Critical Race Theory is or isn't — and to offer reassurance about what is and isn't taught in your school — it is much more important to communicate the values of inclusive, equitable education. Rather than getting sucked into a debate where you may end up beyond your depth or giving further airtime to unhelpful attacks, focus on what you know. Share why you believe an inclusive, culturally affirming, honest education is so valuable. For example, you might share messages like the following.

Every student should feel

welcome in the classroom. Children need a high-trust, low-stress environment to learn. And they deserve it. Students deserve to feel safe asking questions, contributing to discussions, and trying new skills. Seeing themselves and their experiences reflected in what they're learning and reading bolsters engagement and confidence that the classroom is an open, supportive space.

Many scholars have researched neuroscience and other developmental studies that underpin the critical value of belonging and other psychological needs for young people to thrive in school (e.g., Gonzales et al., 2021; Hammond, 2014).

Every student should be prepared for success beyond high school. In a 2021 poll about race-related issues in K-12 education conducted by Echelon Insights, 82% of respondents indicated they want schools to focus more on “preparing students for success beyond high school.”

Today's students will enter an increasingly diverse and globally interconnected workforce, and, for them to succeed, it's incumbent on schools to prepare them to be culturally literate, empathic leaders. Employers value communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and integrity — skills that young people will only develop in open and inclusive learning environments (Yoder et al., 2020).

Every school should prepare students to help create a better future. Honest engagement with history helps students think critically about the world they live in so they can build a better future for us all. The poll mentioned above found that 95% of respondents were interested in seeing schools emphasize empathy and curiosity as much as or more than they currently do.

Curious and empathic thinkers can recognize inequality or prejudice, address it, and ultimately help prevent it. It's nearly impossible to encourage and sharpen this kind of thinking when accurate but uncomfortable topics are censored and banned from K-12

curriculum. Grappling with America's history is one important way students learn to navigate difficult conversations and uncomfortable experiences like those they will inevitably face once they leave the classroom.

SEEK COMMON GROUND — THERE IS MORE OF IT THAN YOU THINK.

Despite the loud volume of a coordinated few, there actually remains a large vast middle. The vast middle are the persuadable folks between those who advocate for equity intentionally and often publicly and those who oppose it. What we often find in our work is that the persuadable vast middle rarely identifies with educational jargon, but they often agree with the concept of equity when it's framed in a resonant way.

It turns out that when the jargon and hot-button language are removed, and people understand what is actually being taught in classrooms, there tends to be strong consensus: Honest conversations in the classroom are essential to children's development.

According to the Echelon Insights (2021) survey, a majority of Americans across party lines agree that schools should celebrate the diversity among students and teach the full history of our country — including the things of which we aren't proud. Most people are proud to be Americans and value instilling in our children a love for their country.

At the same time, many Americans acknowledge that racism still exists today and that, in many ways, race relations are worsening. How do you resolve that tension? One way is to talk about America as a work in progress. We have tested messaging acknowledging how America's complicated past informs the future — by both celebrating the good and confronting the bad, we can best equip the next generation to make our country better — and found that very few people disagree with that framing.

Perhaps it is because progress

is a part of the American identity. Former President Barack Obama often described progressive change as a testament to America, not a repudiation of it. We are great because we have the capacity to change and right wrongs, and we are made greater when we do.

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT AND REMEMBER THAT THE MESSENGER MATTERS AS MUCH AS THE MESSAGE.

Although the messages we recommended above tend to resonate with many people, there is no magic phrase to use in every situation or with every audience. When you're engaging on these topics, ask yourself: What does my audience care most about? What are their fears or concerns? Do they know a lot about what is happening in schools or do they only think they know based on the most recent headlines?

It's also important to ask yourself if you are the right person to deliver the message. Consider who your audience will most relate to and trust. Is it a parent, a mental health professional, a student, a teacher, a school counselor? You can ask these people to join the conversations, perhaps to elevate a personal experience to underpin your message.

The voices of parents and students — particularly students and parents of color who want to share their stories — are especially powerful. Of course, be sure to support and encourage students who are actively engaging in these conversations so that they do not feel vulnerable or become targets of verbal attacks.

BRAVE CONVERSATIONS IN ACTION

While headlines and social media spotlight division, remember that there is much common ground to be found. When it comes to supporting equity, many citizens haven't yet made up their minds. Engaging in brave conversations, approaching them with curiosity, and elevating shared values will help turn the tide and help people

see themselves and their communities in the promise of equity.

Brave conversations have already helped inform and persuade the undecided and drive positive steps toward change. For example, a multiracial student group at Central York High School in Pennsylvania organized and reversed a book ban by elevating their truth and values. A suburban parent coalition studied the anti-Critical Race Theory rhetoric across the region so that when it surfaced in their Newtown, Ohio, school board meetings, they were ready to give speeches in support of equity that were so compelling the opposition stopped showing up. School leaders around the country are increasingly naming their desire to focus more on solving inequities and less on politics.

Now is the time to step into such brave conversations — or to start them, when necessary. If you haven't yet, proactively make a public statement,

starting with your values and centering your aspirations for young people. Keep an open and evolving conversation going with your leadership, staff, and service providers so you can learn from one another and work from an informed, unified foundation. Find allies and lift each other up.

When you feel overwhelmed or frustrated, remember the stakes for students. And remember that the concept of equity resonates with most people when they hear it in a relatable and jargon-free way from a trusted source. You can be that source, and this moment needs your voice.

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