What Your Colleagues Are Saying . . .

I strongly recommend that educators interested in high-quality discussion as both a form and outcome of pedagogy read *Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities*. Schmidt and Pinkney bring decades of experience to the task of expertly situating the need to teach young people how to participate in civil discourse in our current political context. Through lively and well-written narrative, the authors bring a lot of new wine to a venerable bottle. Readers will walk away with strong rationales for focusing on civil discourse in schools, along with very clear and pragmatic examples of what good looks like.

—Diana E. Hess
Dean
University of Wisconsin–Madison School of Education

How can schools and teachers prepare our youngest citizens to actively engage in discourse about issues in society? Schmidt and Pinkney's book brilliantly explains why discussing contentious issues matters, for both the future of our democracy and student learning, while providing a wealth of practical ideas and resources for teachers. This book couldn't be more timely and enduring,

—Stefanie Rosenberg Wager
Past President of the National Council for the Social Studies

Helping young people to learn to discuss contentious issues is one of the most promising ways to strengthen—and even to save—our republic. In *Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities*, Schmidt and Pinkney provide a scholarly, thoughtful, and also highly practical guide to doing just that. Teachers will find it extraordinarily useful.

—Peter Levine
Tisch College of Civic Life
Tufts University

Schmidt and Pinkney are seasoned and masterful social studies educators and advocates. They present the topic of civil discourse in a manner that is knowledgeable and approachable. The strategies presented in *Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities* implore educators to be courageous and incorporate these techniques and practices in their classrooms.

—**Amber Coleman-Mortley**
Podcaster, Civic Evangelist, and Parent Educator

Masterful and timely, Schmidt and Pinkney's *Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities*, is—to paraphrase David McCullough—"a guide [for social studies teachers] to navigation in perilous times." This brilliantly scaffolded set of practices guides social studies teachers through the often-challenging process of bringing meaningful and constructive civil discourse into the classroom. This is a must-have for your social studies classroom.

—**Nathan McAlister**
Social Studies Teacher
2010 National History Teacher of the Year

Schools can never be culturally neutral terrains devoid of politics. And because of this, educators will continue to grapple with the teaching of potentially contentious topics. We live in a time where students and educators are confronted with political debates, blatant racism, a global pandemic, and more. *Civil Discourse* offers classroom teachers and school leaders a practical guide to facilitate classroom conversations with knowledge and sensitivity. It will equip you with strategies and tools to not only act tomorrow but to critically reflect on your own practice as an educator.

—**Darnell Fine**
Instructional Coach

Civil discourse is essential for a functioning democracy. Schmidt and Pinkney lay out a step-by-step guide using building blocks that allow educators to help build communities in their classrooms by allowing them to foster civil discourse with their students. They involve multiple stakeholders in the solution-based approach to discussing contentious topics in classrooms and how that can make a larger impact outside the classroom. This is a must-read for all who work with students and who want to make an impact through civil discourse.

—**Elizabeth Evans**
Director of Civic Education
Center for Political Thought and Leadership
Arizona State University

Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities offers hope and help for educators during this highly polarized moment. Co-authors Schmidt and Pinkney urge educators to take courage and view contentious topics as an opportunity to train and instill understanding, belonging, and empathy in students. This book is packed with ideas, tips, and strategies to aid the educator in successfully establishing and cultivating a classroom where civil discourse leads to a community where students learn to accept and celebrate differences with maturity and respect; with *Civil Discourse*, students will learn how to think, not what to think.

—Karalee Wong Nakatsuka
United States History Teacher
Arcadia, CA
2019 Gilder Lehrman California History Teacher of the Year

Engaging students in discussion requires the teacher to think about much more than which questions to ask. Covering everything from how to communicate with parents to what to do when discussions go awry, this succinct guide provides educators with the foundations and strategies they need to create high-quality classroom discussions.

—Paula McAvoy
PhD Coordinator for the Social Studies Program Area of Study
North Carolina State University

Now, more than ever, our young people need to be equipped with the right tools to engage in critical conversations that will allow them to take informed action on issues that negatively impact our society. *Civil Discourse*, with its practical guidance for building community, cultivating empathy, and leaning into discomfort with contentious topics, is exactly the type of resource that educators, no matter the subject area, need to support the next generation of change makers. Bravo and thank you!

—Fay Gore
Former Director of K–12 Social Studies,
North Carolina Department of Public Instruction
Co-Editor of the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (2013)

In a time of increasing political and social polarization, understanding the ins and outs of civil discourse has never been more important or potentially more impactful. As with so much else, it is often left up to our educators to navigate a difficult path in ensuring that students learn how to engage in civil discourse around difficult conversations. *Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities* provides both experienced and beginning educators with a way to navigate that path. It is an engaging and enjoyable map for the educator looking for a way forward in improving discussion and tackling tough issues!

—Steve Masyada
Executive Director
Lou Frey Institute
University of Central Florida

This is a timely and needed work for teachers engaging in democratic education. The authors both provide practical approaches to engaging with controversies within the classroom and take on key issues of the day—namely, polarization, the effects of misinformation, and the need to engage with others in civil and empathic ways. They make the case for how schools can play a role in addressing these issues and provide practical and applicable steps forward for teachers at a time when these practices may place them under a political microscope in their communities.

—Jeremy Stoddard
Professor of Curriculum and Instruction
Director of Graduate Studies and UW Teach
University of Wisconsin–Madison

Schmidt and Pinkney write at a time when the need for students to engage in true dialogue and discourse is more important than ever. The pointed examples, protocols and structures, and compelling data make this an essential tool for every educator who engages in such rich topics. Students are naturally curious, opinionated, and eager to discuss bold ideas and controversial concepts, and as a result, they need deft educators who are equipped to teach the skills in discourse while thinking critically, suspending judgement. This book fills an important void in the education of educators to effectively nurture a community of learners, of any age, to critically explore the ideas, beliefs, and perspectives of those around them.

—Scott Thomas
Minnesota School Administrator

Schmidt and Pinkney have created a road map for educators to build confidence in instilling the skills of civic engagement in students. As they brilliantly note, by not talking to those with whom we disagree, we are choosing to ignore our interdependence. Economic, social, educational, and environmental benefits can all develop in the form of a well-informed voter focused not on the correct answer but rather on the correct way to navigate civil discourse. This reading gives me hope that students today will be better equipped to create a sustainable civil society for us all.

—Stephanie Rogers Canter
EdTech Professional, Advocate for Progressive
Educational Policy, and Local Elected Official

I can almost hear social studies teachers' collective sigh of relief. Schmidt and Pinkney have written a book that illuminates one of education's great challenges and offers realistic, reasonable, and attainable recommendations. The balance of structure and flexibility in their approach reflects an authentic understanding of what it means to be a classroom teacher in this moment. The authors honor teachers' professionalism and expertise, with vigorous assurance that we all have much to learn. The whole book feels like a PLC of gifted, welcoming teachers gathered in a comfortable teachers' lounge, coffee in hand, ready to solve all the world's problems.

—Jessica Ellison
Teacher Education and Curriculum Development
Minnesota Historical Society

Schmidt and Pinkney indisputably define and provide a road map/ strategy for civil discourse. In a time when barbershop, hair salon, club, and church meeting conversations can turn contentious and even violent at times, these strategies are a welcomed resource. Providing our students with the necessary skills and processes of considerate, thought-provoking discourse may foster transformation of our individual communities.

—Chanda Robinson
CEO and Founder
Chanda Robinson Consulting
Member of the National Council for the
Social Studies Board of Directors

Schmidt and Pinkney provide a blueprint for teachers who face the daily challenge of tackling contentious topics. *Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities* is a timely resource that will assist teachers with building a classroom culture built on courage, understanding, belonging, and empathy. Teachers are provided helpful strategies that will bolster teacher confidence and ultimately make a positive impact on student learning.

—Daniel Kelley
Principal
Smithfield High School
Smithfield, RI

With our homogenized neighborhoods and echo chamber media bubbles, schools are one of the few places where Americans can engage in discourse about important topics with people who hold differing viewpoints. *Civil Discourse* provides teachers with clear guidance on how to facilitate these invaluable conversations in their classrooms. Teachers from all grade levels will benefit from the wisdom found in these pages.

—Bruce Lesh
Former High School Teacher and Social
Studies Department Chair, Baltimore County Public Schools

Learning how to teach contentious issues is difficult for preservice teachers who don't yet have the confidence to facilitate these types of discussions with students. *Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities* is a road map for teachers on how to get started. Schmidt and Pinkney focus on building community, which is often overlooked in conversations about teaching contentious topics. They lay a foundation for how to have civil discourse in all classrooms— not just social studies ones. This book highlights civil discourse as a life skill—one that all teachers can practice learning from.

—Annie McMahon Whitlock
Associate Professor of Elementary Education
University of Michigan-Flint

In a time when a primer on engaging students in meaningful and purposeful discourse on public matters has never been more needed, Schmidt and Pinkney deliver a comprehensive vision. Each chapter provides a substantive explanation and actionable recommendations for how teachers, collaborative teams, and administrations can work to transform social studies instruction into a much needed foundry for democratic citizenship.

—Jenifer Hitchcock
Teacher
Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology

It's time we stop talking about creating active and knowledgeable citizens and start the actual process of training our students to engage in civil and civic discourse. One reason we often push this process to the back burner in our lesson plan books is because we're just not sure what that can look like. In *Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities*, Schmidt and Pinkney provide not just a powerful rationale for developing engaged citizens but the practical tools to make it happen. If you're like me and are tired of randomly searching online for how to facilitate difficult but absolutely vital conversations, then *Civil Discourse* was written specifically for you. Schmidt and Pinkney provide the structure, strategies, and resources you're looking for and that your students need. A perfectly timed book for every educator!

—Glenn Wiebe
Curriculum Consultant

This is a must-have book for every educator's personal library. Schmidt and Pinkney provide an invaluable framework and "how-to" guide for teachers who want to foster healthy civil discussions on controversial issues. The authors make this difficult pedagogical task accomplishable, and their practical guidance strengthens the ability of schools to succeed in their most important mission of developing young people into empathetic, informed, and active citizens.

—Brian Brady
Founder and President
Youth Engage

Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities provides teachers with a step-by-step practical framework on how to engage students in civil discourse. The framework allows teachers to fully implement the civil discourse framework or make adjustments to their current instructional practices. I really appreciate the discussion on the differences between debate, discussion, and dialogue to ensure that students and teachers learn the differences between the concepts and help students engage in meaningful conversations about American politics.

—Averill Kelley
Social Studies Teacher
Holmes Scholar and PhD Candidate at University of Nevada

Schmidt and Pinkney's book is a wonderful primer for educators who need a jumpstart or a refresher on discourse in civics education. They have gathered many practical and useful tips, guides, and resources for the classroom and personal edification for beginning and veteran educators alike. This book is a must-have for anyone teaching in the social studies classroom and training future social studies educators. As a classroom guide and when designing curriculum, Schmidt and Pinkney's book is an invaluable tool for working with students to create strong and engaging discourse civics education.

—Melissa R. Collum
Teaching Professional
Viterbo University

How will students practice and master the skills of engaging in challenging discussions with people of diverse viewpoints if those conversations aren't happening in classrooms? While the past few years have seen a rise in resources aimed at convincing teachers of this need, too few offer a road map to help make this happen. *Civil Discourse* offers the classroom teacher a step-by-step approach to fostering productive civic dialogue in their classroom. Each chapter identifies a list of essential teacher practices and action steps a teacher can take to make those practices their own. This book is a valuable resource for teachers and teacher-educators looking to bring meaningful discussion back into classrooms.

—Shannon Salter Burghardt
Founding Teacher
Building 21 Allentown

Civil Discourse

From Joe:

This book is dedicated to Donald Henry Schmidt, Jr.
You are the greatest man I have ever known.
I am lucky to have you as my dad.
I love you.

From Nichelle:

This book is dedicated to Michelle Burmah-Jones and John Pinkney
for always pushing me to do better and letting me know I had a voice.

Civil Discourse

Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities

Joe Schmidt

Nichelle Pinkney

CORWIN

Printed in the United States of America

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

22 23 24 25 26 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

online resources

For additional resources related to *Civil Discourse*,
please visit the companion website
at **resources.corwin.com/civildiscourse.**

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, Joe and Nichelle would like to thank Julie Stern for serving as our author mentor. You took on the challenge of writing this book with us and never stopped smiling and being there for us. Also, we give a big thank you to Sharon Wu, Tori Bachman, Nancy Chung, and everyone at Corwin who believed in us and allowed us to make our dreams a reality.

We also want to thank all of the educators who are working with students to engage in civil discourse and the administrators and community members who support the educators. Without your passion, none of this would be possible.

From Joe:

This book could not have happened without the support of my friends and family who lost me to countless hours of reading and writing. I would like to give a special thank you to my wife, Peggy, for always helping me to remember to live in the present tense and to my daughter, Honore, who always serves as my first editor.

Thank you also to Keith Long and Dan Kallgren for inspiring my love of social studies that started my path in education and to Deb Foster and Jesse Bradley for helping me get my footing during the early years of my career. To Norma Furger, Denise Kalscheur, Tamara Maxwell, and the entire

MMSD Literacy team, thank you for helping me find my voice. I can never say thank you enough to Kris McDaniel for taking the time to mentor me until I finally started to believe in myself. To my colleagues Stefanie Wager, Scott Abbott, Steve Maysada, and all of CS4, thank you for being the support group I never knew I needed. Thank you Jeff Maves, Shane Gower, David Greenham, Janette Kirk, Lee Anne Larsen, the Secondary SIS team, and the iCivics Educator Network for your friendship and patience during this project while always being there to serve as a thought partner and helping make sure I never lose sight of what is going on in our classrooms and communities. Thank you to Dr. Diana Hess, Dr. Paula McAvoy, and Dr. Peter Levine for your tireless efforts and research, which have served as the inspiration for much of this work.

Lastly, thank you Nichelle Pinkney for taking this journey with me. To learn from you and work with you as we breathed life into these pages was a life-changing experience. I could not have done it alone and I will always value our newfound friendship!

From Nichelle:

This labor of love became a reality because of divine intervention and Twitter. I am so thankful to my amazing co-author, Joe Schmidt, for choosing me to go on this journey with him. I have learned and grown so much; this is just the beginning, my friend!

To my amazing siblings for being my first students even when they didn't want to, thank you. I also thank my nieces and nephews for their willingness to sacrifice their "nana time" so I could meet my deadlines. And to the thousands of students who helped me grow to be the teacher I am today, this book would not have been possible without my days on 3443 Fannett Road on D hall.

Thank you to all the amazing teachers that I have worked with, coached, and mentored. There's nothing like being on teams that push you to grow. To my LTT team, thank you for encouraging me and being that support system.

Lastly, to Sheliah Moss, my ninth-grade U.S. History teacher: Thank you for telling me I was a LEADER and that I could change the world. You held me to this as a student, a team member, and then when I became your department chair 10 years later. Because of your words and faith in me, I strive to build leaders in every student and teacher I interact with. Ms. Moss, you were RIGHT . . . I am a LEADER, I will be heard . . . I am now one step closer to changing the world we live in.

PUBLISHER'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

About the Authors

Joe Schmidt has worked as a high school teacher and college professor for elementary preservice teachers, and he has also held roles in district and state-level leadership in support of both rural and urban schools. Throughout his career, Joe has served in a variety of leadership positions with numerous social studies–related organizations across the United States that align with his passion for supporting inspiring and impactful educational opportunities for both students and educators.

Nichelle Pinkney has been a social studies educator for the past 16 years, working as a classroom teacher to a K–12 curriculum director. She has presented and trained teachers nationally and internationally. Nichelle holds a masters of art in educational administration from Lamar University and a bachelor's degree in sociology with a minor in women's studies from Salem College. Nichelle has found passion in providing equitable education to every student. She has worked to revise curriculum to ensure that it is diverse, equitable, and inclusive for all students and teachers.

CHAPTER 1

Courage
Why Discomfort Can No Longer Be Avoided

It's uncomfortable to challenge the status quo. It's uncomfortable to resist the urge to settle. When you identify the discomfort, you've found the place where a leader is needed. If you're not uncomfortable in your work as a leader, it's almost certain you're not reaching your potential as a leader.

—Seth Godin (2009)

This chapter will help to prepare you to complete the following:

✔ Find connections in your school or district mission or vision statements that support students engaging in civil discourse.

✔ In partnership with administrators, develop a vision statement for social studies education in your school or district that highlights the importance of civil discourse.

✔ Set parameters around which topics are open for discourse.

✔ Communicate the vision statement to parents and the larger community.

MODERN SOCIETY AND
THE THREAT TO DEMOCRACY

Are you ready to get uncomfortable? This question is usually met with a "no" or with awkward silence. In an age where everything is about catering to our comfort, why would we seek to be uncomfortable? On the one hand, avoiding discomfort is part of living an easy life. On the other hand, avoiding discomfort around questions of how we participate in society, function in our community, and interact with others causes problems larger than our own levels of comfort.

Take a moment and reflect on the following questions:

• Has the search for our own personal comfort delivered us to a place where we no longer feel like we can meaningfully participate in our society?

• Do we now live in isolated bubbles separate from those who traditionally would have benefited from us and those we would have benefited from?

• As we become more and more isolated in our own personal search for comfort, what parts of our community and society suffer?

• What parts of our lives suffer when our own search for comfort means that we lash out at other people in our lives who disagree with us so that we might protect the beliefs and ideas that bring us comfort?

• Are we ready to step into the discomfort and be the leader that our students need right now?

If we cannot talk to those with whom we disagree, then we are choosing to cut off parts of our lives and ignore our common humanity and interdependence. In his book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), Robert Putnam posits that among the biggest factors in the decline of civic involvement of Americans is decreasing

attendance in community organizations, groups, and clubs. Without participation in these groups, we have lost what connects individuals of differing political backgrounds and beliefs. Calls for schools to prepare students to be civically active have grown more urgent in recent decades because schools have increasingly become one of the few shared spaces left in our society.

Since the release of *Bowling Alone*, we have seen increased access to the internet and cable television and, more recently, the rise of social media. These forms of communication have made it easier to find those who agree, regardless of where we might live. We are now better able to avoid discomfort by avoiding those who may disagree with us and by finding more people who agree with us. This creates a confirmation bubble to stay comfortable in. Comfortable, that is, until we are forced to cross paths with someone who does disagree with us. This is where social media has become the new town square that allows for soapbox speeches of competing ideas minus many of the social norms that govern how we converse and interact.

Social media has exacerbated differences in opinion and made us more likely to argue with someone we know or even someone we don't know. Most people are now familiar with the term "internet trolls" and many of us have firsthand experience with what some will say online when they can hide behind anonymity. Traditional social norms have not fully evolved in the age of social media.

Without these norms, social media has become a place where we exchange insults instead of ideas and real relationships are impacted by the words exchanged through a screen. In 2017, the Pew Research Center reported that 4 in 10 Americans had personally experienced online harassment and 95% of Americans said that people being harassed or bullied online is a problem (Figures 1.1 and 1.2, respectively) (Duggan, 2017). These are factors that resulted in 27% of Americans choosing not to post something online after seeing how others were treated (Figure 1.3) (Duggan, 2017).

FIGURE 1.1 Percentage of Americans Who Have Experienced Online Harassment

Roughly four in ten Americans have personally experienced online harassment

% of U.S. adults who have experienced_____ online
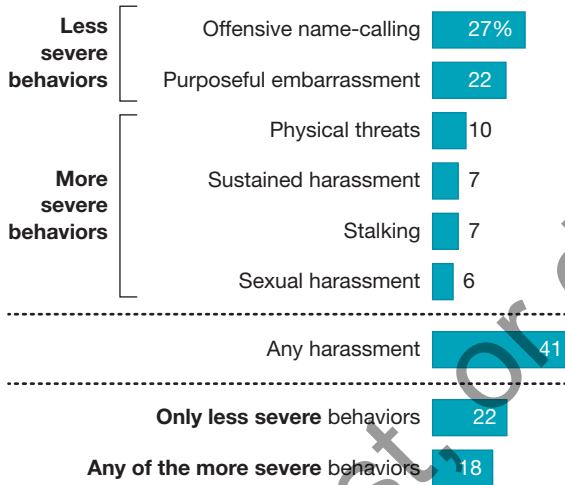
Less severe behaviors	Offensive name-calling	27%
	Purposeful embarrassment	22
More severe behaviors	Physical threats	10
	Sustained harassment	7
	Stalking	7
	Sexual harassment	6
	Any harassment	41
	Only less severe behaviors	22
	Any of the more severe behaviors	18

SOURCES: Survey conducted Jan. 9–23, 2017. "Online Harassment 2017." Pew Research Center.

Duggan (2017).

Online harassment is negatively impacting the lives of people, as this is where a lot of us now spend our time interacting with one another. In our work with people across the United States and even internationally, we ask people if they had enough practice in contentious conversations in their K–12 educational experience. The consensus from everyone we meet is that our students could use more practice in disagreeing respectfully and with maturity. In fact, many adults need to develop these skills as well.

Citizen University (2021), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, envisions "a great civic revival across our nation—our dream is a country in which Americans are steeped in a sense of civic character, educated in the tools of civic power, and are

FIGURE 1.2 Percentage of Americans Who Identify Online Harassment or Bullying as a Problem

Americans look to online companies to address harassment on their platforms

% of U.S. adults who say people being harassed or bullied online is . . .

A major problem	A minor problem	Not a problem
62%	33	5

% who say the <u>most</u> effective way to address online harassment is . . .
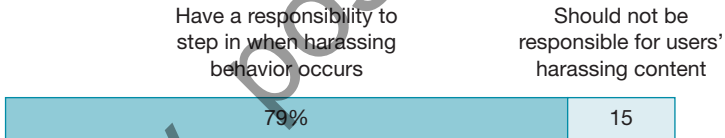
Better policies and tools from online companies	35%
Stronger online harassment laws	31
Peer pressure from other users	15
Increased focus and attention from law enforcement	8

% who say online services . . .

Have a responsibility to step in when harassing behavior occurs	Should not be responsible for users' harassing content
79%	15

SOURCES: Survey conducted Jan. 9–23, 2017. "Online Harassment 2017." Pew Research Center. Duggan (2017).

problem-solving contributors in a self-governing community." To achieve this, they "design gatherings, rituals, and workshops that focus on civic power and civic character as the building blocks of powerful citizenship." Among these are their Civic Saturday events where people gather to participate in what they call a "civic sermon."

Civic Saturdays allow for both "friends and strangers to nurture a shared purpose in our democracy" (Citizen University,

FIGURE 1.3 Percentage of Americans Who Choose Not to Post Something Online Based on How Others Are Treated

More than a quarter of Americans have chosen to not post something online after seeing harassment of others

% of U.S. adults who have _____ after witnessing harassing behaviors directed toward others online

Category	Percentage
Set up or adjusted privacy settings	28%
Chosen not to post something online	27
Changed any info in online profiles	16
Stopped using an online service	13
Any of these	47

SOURCES: Survey conducted Jan. 9–23, 2017. "Online Harassment 2017." Pew Research Center.

Duggan (2017).

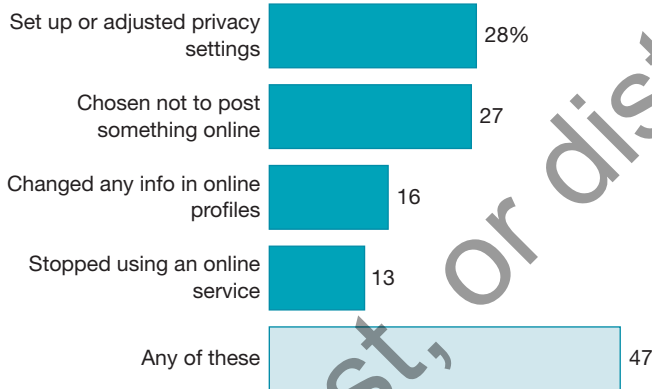**NOTE:** Total may not add to 100% because respondents could select multiple options.

2021). The shared purpose is developed through the discussion of ideas across the political spectrum. Eric Liu (2019), cofounder and CEO of Citizen University, talks about the power of attending a Civic Saturday in his TED Talk, "How to Revive Your Belief in Democracy":

> When you come to a Civic Saturday and are invited to discuss a question like "Who are you responsible for?" or "What are you willing to risk or to give up for your community?" When that happens, something moves. You are moved. You start telling your story.

CIVIL DISCOURSE

We start actually seeing one another. You realize that homelessness, gun violence, gentrification, terrible traffic, mistrust of newcomers, fake news—these things aren't someone else's problem; they are the aggregation of your own habits and omissions. Society becomes how you behave.

What are the habits and omissions that Liu is referring to? Are they the same habits that we have developed to protect our own comfort? When we withdraw from our communities because we do not feel comfortable in disagreeing with someone else, does our omission perpetuate a society in which the ability to disagree with someone is not valued? If society becomes how we behave, then withdrawing to our own personal comfort level at the expense of interacting with others leads to the rationale of withdrawing while still not understanding that our own withdrawal contributes to the problem.

Dr. Peter Levine (2013), Associate Dean of Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University, highlights the importance of citizenship in his book, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*. Working backward, Levine tells us that in order to achieve social justice, good government and strong communities are essential. In order to have good government and strong communities, we must have active citizenship from members of our society. During a speech at the Frontiers of Democracy Conference, Levine (2014) defined citizenship as "deliberation + collaboration + civic relationships." All three components involve interacting with as opposed to withdrawing from others.

Leaving the comfort of our self-imposed bubbles is essential to the work of maintaining our communities. A community relies on the ability of people to deliberate in order to determine the best course of action, collaborate in order to put the

idea into action, and develop civic relationships in order to keep moving ideas forward (Dusso & Kennedy, 2015). The importance of this cannot be understated, as "large amounts of the deliberation, collaboration, and civic relationships actually do pay off in terms of economic, social, educational, environmental benefits" (Levine, 2014). Overcoming our fear of discomfort in order to actively engage with others through deliberation and collaboration is required to sustain and strengthen our communities.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS

John F. Kennedy famously asked, "If not us, who? If not now, when?" This is the same question facing educators in our world today. Educators live at a unique intersection of being adults living in the present as well as working with the students who will become the adults of tomorrow. With the great privilege of seeing into the future, educators also carry the burden of being able to influence that future. Historian and journalist Henry Adams once said, "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops."

A civic revival is the cure to a world of online harassment and growing societal isolation. This revival must have roots in the classrooms of today in order to be sustainable. If the cure to what ails us is not in the hands of educators teaching students to engage in civil discourse, then who holds the key? If now is not the time to take up these conversations, then when will be the right time for our schools to lead?

Social studies educators look at the world with a lens that asks, "How would I teach this in my classroom?" Our world is one of uncomfortable topics and a society struggling to address them. To maintain our comfort, we avoid talking about these topics or we talk without truly listening to others. If we do not listen, then we do not have to face the reality that others might not agree with us or, even worse, that our beliefs

may be misguided or incorrect. But what about our students in our schools? Should our students expect to learn in spaces where discomfort is avoided at all times?

Among the general public, one common fear or misunderstanding is that a curriculum tells students what beliefs they should walk away with. But that is not the purpose of a curriculum. Nor should educators push their own beliefs onto their students. The goal of a classroom is to create a curriculum and a learning environment where students feel comfortable practicing the skills of discourse with their peers around topics with which they may not agree, with the teacher acting as a skilled facilitator and model of courage and maturity.

While educators should remain neutral facilitators, students actually enjoy hearing diverse views from their classmates. The work of Dr. Diana Hess and Dr. Paula McAvoy sheds light on the impact of sharing differing opinions with one another:

> Students would report that in discussions where there was a lot of shared opinion, those were not as interesting as in discussions where there were differing views . . . They were really responding to the fact that it's quite interesting to hear what your peers think about things. And not just that they have different points of view but what they're supporting those points of view with. (Drummond, 2015)

Moreover, discomfort lies at the heart of *all* learning and growth. Many educators are familiar with the work of Lev Vygotsky. His work around the zone of proximal development focuses on student learning outside of the comfort zone of what they already know (Vygotsky, 1978). The idea is that we intentionally move students beyond what they

can comfortably do by providing them guidance and support from a "more knowledgeable other," as shown in Figure 1.4. This may be a teacher or a peer providing the necessary support, but the essential component to student learning is moving students outside of their comfort zone. We cannot allow our students to avoid discomfort in our classrooms if we want them to learn.

Schools should not reflect society's tendency to shy away from tough topics. Schools should lead the way by providing students with a safe space to be uncomfortable. Educators should model the skills of active listening, considering multiple points of view, determining the reliability of evidence, and yes, even sharing a bit about how their thinking has changed or evolved after gaining more insight, with topics that are not as contentious so as to remain relatively neutral on those.

FIGURE 1.4 Zone of Proximal Development

Can't do
even if guided

Can do
if guided

Can do
independently

Zone of Proximal
Development
(ZPD)

CIVIL DISCOURSE
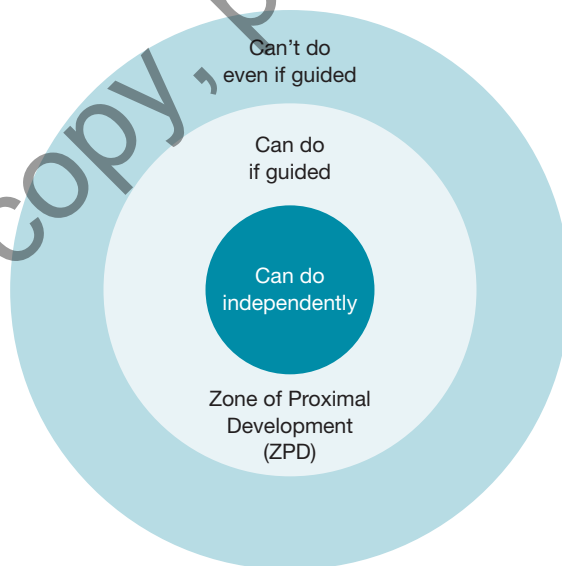
Acknowledging that differences in opinions may divide us, the introduction to the College, Career, & Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards highlights that despite these differences, we do share universal goals for social studies education:

> Advocates of citizenship education cross the political spectrum, but they are bound by a common belief that our democratic republic will not sustain unless students are aware of their changing cultural and physical environments; the past; read, write, and think deeply; and act in ways that promote the common good. There will always be differing perspectives on these objectives. The goal of knowledgeable, thinking, and active citizens, however, is universal. (National Council for the Social Studies, 2018)

The contemporary issues of today are often rooted in ideas that have been disagreed about for decades if not centuries. To learn our history with a depth of understanding, students have to face the realities of living in a country that continues to struggle with these contentious ideas. How do we teach these familiar histories while also giving these stories context, meaning, and connection to the present day?

What is your comfort level in leading a student discussion about these topics?

- Politics and elections

- Racial issues and inequities

- Economic policies and how they impact different people

- Gender rights

- Constitutional rights

- Religious beliefs and protections

- Upholding individual rights while looking out for the common good

- Celebrating diversity while also promoting unity

- Treating people fairly versus treating people equally

- Following laws that conflict with one's moral ethics

- Interacting with our physical world and natural resources

A lot of these topics are becoming hot-button issues that cause problems for educators, even when handled in a manner that allows for open, thoughtful discourse. None of those topics call out a specific contentious issue; rather, they encompass overarching concepts that span across content areas. We need to provide the context to practice the skills of civil discourse if we are to support our students in becoming knowledgeable, thinking, and active citizens.

Creating active citizens is often a reason we are called to be social studies teachers, and it is a democratic imperative. This responsibility is one of the most consistent ideals that has been expressed throughout the modern history of education in the United States. Back in 1848, Horace Mann warned,

> But to avoid such a catastrophe, shall all teaching, relative to the nature of our government, be banished from our schools; and shall our children be permitted to grow up in complete ignorance of the political history of their country? In the schools of a republic, shall the children be left without any distinct knowledge of the nature of a republican government; or only with such knowledge as they may pick up from angry political discussions, or from party newspapers; from caucus speeches, or Fourth of July orations—the Apocrypha of Apocrypha?

Even then, educational leaders were worried about students getting caught up in the rhetoric of angry politics!

While the divided political scene of today is a fresh concern in our minds, remember that Horace Mann had similar worries back in 1848. Mann said education would provide the information students needed to know about their government as opposed to what they might hear as part of angry political discussions. Almost two centuries later, Dr. Diana Hess implored teachers to have their students lean into these heated disagreements as part of their learning: "Part of our job is to teach young people how to talk with one another, especially with people who have differing views" (Van Benthuysen & Hodgin, 2019).

Influential education reformer John Dewey (1934) took Mann one step further as he addressed the role of our students in society as a whole: "The purpose of education has always been to every one, in essence, the same—to give the young the things they need in order to develop in an orderly, sequential way into members of society." Horace Mann focused on supporting the republic, but John Dewey believed an orderly society to be the responsibility of schools and the primary purpose of education (EdSource, 2002).

In January 1957, the ASCD (Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development) Committee on Platform of Beliefs combined the ideas of schools supporting the republic and students becoming members of society: "The main purpose of the American school is to provide for the fullest possible development of each learner for living morally, creatively, and productively in a democratic society" (ASCD, 2012). According to ASCD, it was not enough for students to be able to function in both our society and in our republic. Schools needed to bring students to their "fullest possible development" in support of these goals.

ASCD is not alone in their belief in schools to produce students capable of critical thinking and engaged citizenship. In "The Curriculum Matrix: Transcendence and Mathematics," Arthur W. Foshay (1991) saw a vision of education to produce fully developed human beings: "The one continuing

purpose of education, since ancient times, has been to bring people to as full a realization as possible of what it is to be a human being" (p. 277). With an emphasis in recent years of teaching to the whole child, Foshay tells us that this should be and always has been the goal of education for our students.

Having students discuss problematic issues is not something to be done only in social studies classrooms; rather, this type of engaged learning should be at the heart of a child's education. By the start of the 21st century, connections were made between character education and the role of schools in engaging students in real-life problem-solving. Schaps et al. (2001) identified schools as the place where this type of learning could properly happen for young people:

> The best forms of character education are those that enlist students as active, influential participants in creating a caring and just environment in the classroom and in the school at large . . . The challenge is for the school to become a microcosm in which students practice age-appropriate versions of the roles they must face in later life—and deal with the related problems and complications.

So if these essential skills are no longer practiced in normal, everyday life, then where can we reasonably expect these skills to be practiced? As one of the few shared spaces left in our communities, it is becoming increasingly important that schools are able to take the lead on developing the citizens who will both lead and participate in all facets of our communities in the future. This is not a responsibility that schools can afford to turn away from. In her book *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion*, Dr. Hess (2009) explains why this is an obligation of our schools:

> [S]chools have not just the right, but also the obligation, to create an atmosphere of intellectual

and political freedom that uses genuine public controversies to help students discuss and envision political possibilities. Addressing public controversies in schools not only is more educative than quashing or ignoring differences, it also enhances the quality of decision-making by ensuring that multiple and competing views about controversial political issues are aired, fairly considered, and critically evaluated. (p. 6)

Hess is not alone in the idea that schools are the correct and essential place to work on these skills. Dr. Peter Levine identifies three essential things that schools should be doing in order to prepare students for meaningful civic participation (Arizona State University, 2020). One of these is to "learn how to deliberate matters of disagreement with other people." Levine argues that not only is school a place to learn this, but that schools are a *better* place to learn these skills. Learning how to deliberate matters of disagreement with other people is a "question of both skills and knowledge" that can be practiced and should be taught (Arizona State University, 2020). The idea that these are skills that need to be taught almost demands that schools be the place where students practice these skills alongside the content knowledge necessary to engage in thoughtful discourse. With guidance, discussions can be grounded in information as well as emotions and rhetoric.

There is a misleading idea that schools are preparing students for the "real world." Perhaps this is partially true, but with smartphones, social media, and the internet, there is no longer a strict divide between the lives of our students while they are in school and the real world outside of school. When it comes to the ability to engage in civil discourse in order to share ideas and express opinions, the real world is only a click or an app away. We can no longer reasonably
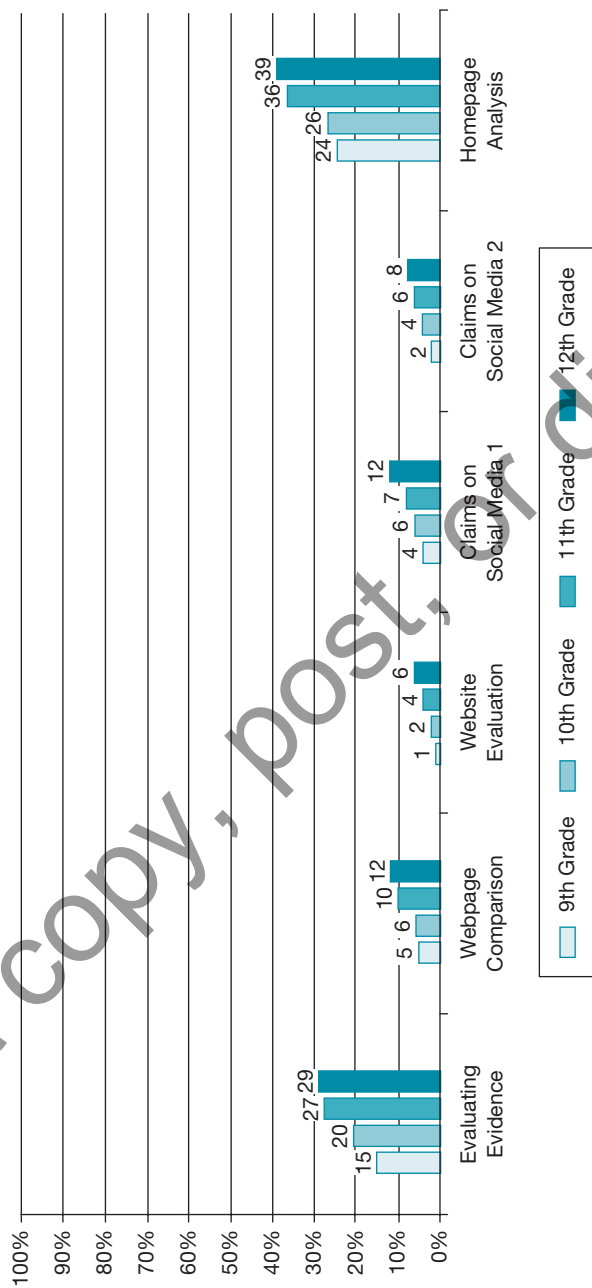
expect to shield our students from the responsibilities of adulthood when some of our students are already expanding their worlds in ways we could have never imagined. Schools have to be a safe place to practice the skills of disagreement and discomfort, because the digital world often is not a safe space for real discourse. We owe it to our students to prepare them for life outside of school.

As technology increases the availability of primary sources available to the general public, the classroom use of primary sources has accelerated as well. As Dr. Sam Wineburg noted in a 2018 interview with *Perspectives on History*, "This device [his cellphone] is in many ways more powerful than any library we have had from 1900 to 1970" (Elliott, 2018). While access to information has become easier, so has access to misinformation that muddies the waters. Access to information has changed so rapidly that our media literacy skills have not been able to keep up. As we have opened the door to focusing on more and multiple perspectives, we have also unlatched the gate to information that is dubious at best and outright lies at worst.

Society in general and students in particular have struggled to understand what is reliable and what is useful only in reinforcing our own beliefs. Figure 1.5 presents the results of a Stanford History Education Group (2019) survey on student mastery of civic online reasoning. Even as high school students get better each year at "going online and discerning fact from fiction," all data points are below a 40% success rate, with more than half of the categories in single digits.

While many of us will agree with the earlier quote that our smartphones are "more powerful than any library," it must be noted that the process of being published and included in a library was and is far more rigorous than the current process of posting information online.

FIGURE 1.5 Percentage of Students Scoring Emerging or Mastery on Civic Online Reasoning by Grade and Task

Legend:
- 9th Grade
- 10th Grade
- 11th Grade
- 12th Grade

Evaluating Evidence: 29, 27, 20, 15
Webpage Comparison: 12, 10, 6, 5
Website Evaluation: 6, 4, 2, 1
Claims on Social Media 1: 12, 7, 6, 4
Claims on Social Media 2: 8, 6, 4, 2
Homepage Analysis: 39, 36, 26, 24

SOURCE: Stanford History Education Group (2019).

NOTE: This figure includes 2939 students who selected a grade category although the number of responding students varied by task. Excluded categories include "8th grade" and "missing."

> What once fell on the shoulders of editors, fact-checkers, and subject matter experts now falls on the shoulders of each and every one of us. But there's a problem with this new reality. As the journalist John H. McManus reminds us, in a democracy the ill-informed hold just as much power in the ballot box as the well-informed. The future of the republic hangs in the balance. (Wineburg, 2015, p. 16)

Although educators may hesitate to let their students engage in research on the internet, we must never lose sight of the importance of reinforcing our students' ability to reach reasoned conclusions. This means they must be able to state a claim, provide evidence, and explain the reasoning that connects the evidence to their claim across all content areas.

Having students understand that there are multiple ways to approach an idea, concept, or problem is one of the deeper learning transferable skills that many educators strive for as they dig into the content of their classroom. Rote memorization has made way for the practical application of skills that relies on a student's ability to process content information to potentially reach multiple acceptable answers or potential solutions to a problem.

In the title of his book, *Why Won't You Just Tell Us the Answer?* Bruce Lesh (2011) sums up the struggles that students may have with this shift. We cannot blame our students for having this mindset of strictly looking for the correct answer. Our students have come of age in a school system that stresses correct answers as opposed to correct thinking. The 21st-century school requires students to step out of their comfort zone of always looking for the correct answer. Instead we need to engage them in a dialogue that reflects their thinking beyond a single story.

The focus of social studies education and history education in particular has been moving toward the notion of not focusing

on a single right answer. Instead we want to reinforce the use and development of skills that support the processing of information in order to reach a well-reasoned response. This means that schools have seen a shift in pedagogy away from the memorization of names, dates, and places and in its place, movement toward a classroom environment where students are doing the work that historians themselves would do. Students are now engaging in historical inquiry with the goal of corroborating information to reach plausible and defensible answers given the information at hand.

CONCRETE STEPS FOR EDUCATORS

Now that we have established the need for educators to engage students in civil discourse, how do we do it in a way that minimizes conflict, missteps, and upset? This section outlines four concrete steps for teachers to take to create the first building block of courage to foster civil discourse.

1. Align to school mission or vision statements.
2. Create a social studies vision statement.
3. Set broad parameters on topics.
4. Communicate with parents and the larger community.

First, review the big-picture goals of your school or district to find alignment to civil discourse. These provide a shared language and agreed-upon goals from which to begin your planning and preparations. Many large districts have recently adopted a portrait of a graduate or a learner profile. Consider these examples from one of the largest school districts in the United States:

- Employs active listening strategies to advance understanding.

- Respects divergent thinking to engage others in thoughtful discussion.

- Demonstrates the ability to work interdependently within a group to promote learning, increase productivity, and achieve common goals.

- Analyzes and constructs arguments and positions to ensure examination of a full range of viewpoints.

- Acknowledges and understands diverse perspectives and cultures when considering local, national, and world issues.

- Contributes to solutions that benefit the broader community.

- Demonstrates empathy, compassion, and respect for others.

- Acts responsibly and ethically to build trust and lead. (Fairfax County Public Schools, 2014)

Starting here puts everyone on the same page for what we are trying to achieve. Use these as a starting point and schedule a meeting with your direct supervisor or social studies department at your school or district to discuss the next step.

Second, in collaboration with your supervisor and administration, craft a short vision statement for social studies that is aligned to what you've discovered in the school vision or mission statement. For instance, the National Council for the Social Studies (2010) states, "The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world." A statement like this can be used when communicating to parents in step 4, such as posting it on the class web page, school newsletter, course outline or syllabus, and even in social studies classrooms.

Third, articulate clear guardrails on how to determine which topics or perspectives are open for examination and which ones are not. For instance, a school district in Texas issued a clarifying statement when one of its senior administrators suggested that elementary teachers have books on "opposing views" of the Holocaust (Killough, 2021). This example

points to the need to clarify two types of questions: open versus settled.

In her book *Controversy in the Classroom*, Hess (2009) introduces us to what she identifies as the importance in differentiating between what she calls "open" versus "settled" questions. Open questions are those that experts in the field are actively working to answer, such as the most effective economic policies to reduce inequality or poverty. Settled questions are those that the vast majority of the expert community accept as the empirical evidence that answers the question.

For instance, the question of whether or not the Earth is warming has overwhelming empirical data affirming this truth, yet the idea of global warming is a contentious one for many people. Similarly, questions related to vaccines and their related health impacts have been repeatedly proven with scientific research and data, yet those who disagree with these findings are often significant voices in the public debate on the safety of vaccines.

Schools can offer clarity that says we don't discuss every contentious topic found on social media. We discuss topics that are open, political questions of which there is a lack of consensus among the expert community on the answer. Award-winning history teacher Ayo Magwood explained what open versus settled or closed questions look like in her classroom:
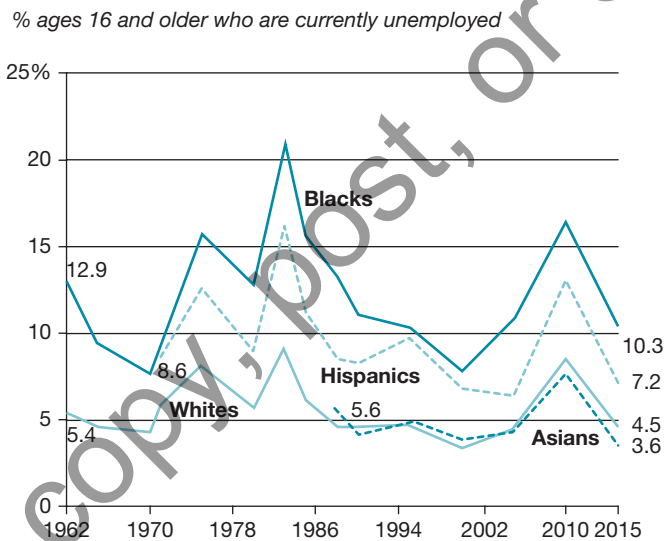
> Open means it is still up for debate, closed means that a vast majority of the social scientists on this issue agree on a conclusion. So we don't discuss closed issues in the classroom. We don't discuss whether the Holocaust existed. We do not discuss whether vaccines create autism, because there is a discoverable answer and it has been discovered. (Stern & Aleo, 2020)

Magwood goes on to explain that she begins conversations about race in the United States with empirical data. Are there

empirical data that show that race plays a role in people's lives? Yes. This can be seen in Pew Research Center (2016) data on unemployment (Figure 1.6), income (Figure 1.7), education (Figure 1.8), home ownership (Figure 1.9), and court and prison systems (Figure 1.10). Magwood communicates to her students, administration, and students' parents that the question of whether or not systemic racism exists is settled and therefore not discussed as a topic to examine from multiple perspectives. "But *what to do about* systemic racism is

FIGURE 1.6   Race and Unemployment

The Black unemployment rate today is double that of whites

% ages 16 and older who are currently unemployed

NOTE: The unemployment rate refers to the share of the labor force (those working or actively seeking work) who are not employed. Whites, Blacks and Asians include only those who reported a single race. Native Americans and mixed-race groups not shown. Data for whites, Blacks and Asians from 1971 to 2015 include only non-Hispanics. Data for whites and Blacks prior to 1971 include Hispanics. Data for Hispanics not available prior to 1971. Hispanics are of any race. Data for Asians not available prior to 1988. Asians include Pacific Islanders.

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FIGURE 1.7 Race and Household Income

Racial gaps in household income persist

Median adjusted household income in 2014 dollars

certainly an open, political question, and that we *will* discuss and consider from multiple perspectives," says Magwood.

This is the same for many of the contentious topics that our society is currently wrestling with. We shouldn't be asking, "Is the climate changing?" but rather, "What should we do about it?" Religion, guns, crime, drugs, immigration, health care, and many more contentious topics are closely connected to how people view themselves as human beings. Therefore,

FIGURE 1.8   Race and Higher Education

Whites are more likely than Blacks to have college degree

% of U.S. adults ages 25 and older who have at least a bachelor's degree
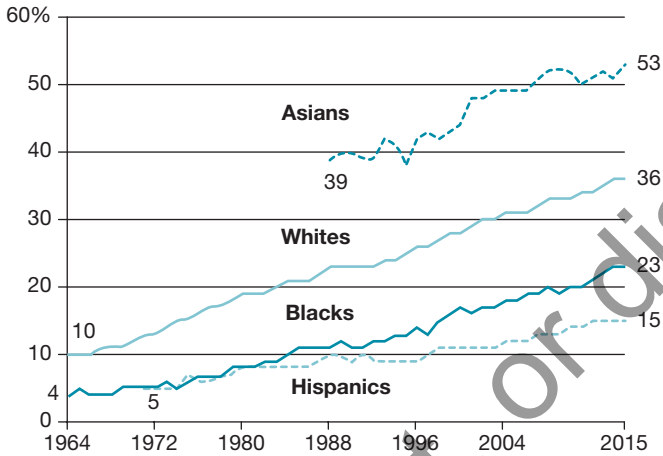
SOURCES: Pew Research Center tabulation of the 1964–2015 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (IPUMS).

"On Views of Race and Inequality, Blacks and Whites Are Worlds Apart."

Pew Research Center (2016).

NOTE: Whites, Blacks and Asians include only those who reported a single race. Native Americans and mixed-race groups not shown. Data for whites, Blacks and Asians from 1971 to 2015 include only non-Hispanics. Data for whites and Blacks prior to 1971 include Hispanics. Data for Hispanics not available prior to 1971. Hispanics are of any race. Data for Asians not available prior to 1988. Asians include Pacific Islanders. Prior to 1992 those who completed at least 16 years of school are classified as having a bachelor's degree.
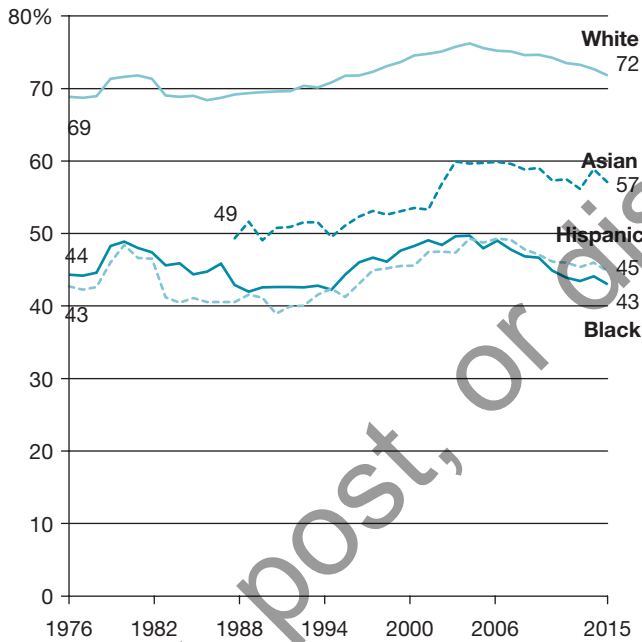
we first address the empirical data available to agree upon what we know definitively. Then we turn our attention to discussing the best solutions for how society should handle our differences in opinions instead of our opinions of people. The skills needed in these conversations are skills that can be practiced in our classrooms.

Dr. Wineburg's (2010) research supports this view on the importance of evidence to offer credibility to ideas. He says, " . . . while everyone is entitled to an opinion, not every opinion deserves to be believed. In history, a persuasive opinion is

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FIGURE 1.9 Race and Home Ownership

Homeownership is more common among whites than other racial and ethnic groups

% of ___ householders owning a home

NOTE: Race and ethnicity based on the race and ethnicity of the head of household. White, Black and Asian householders include only non-Hispanics who reported a single race. Native Americans and mixed-race groups not shown. Data for Asians not available prior to 1988. Asians include Pacific Islanders. Hispanics are of any race.

one backed up by evidence" (p. 2; McManus, 2012). Claims, evidence, and reasoning are essential skills in all subject areas. More specifically in social studies, this means the ability of students to engage in historical thinking to properly source, contextualize, and corroborate the evidence as part of a close read (Stanford History Education Group, 2020).

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FIGURE 1.10   Race and Imprisonment Rates

Imprisonment rates have declined across racial and ethnic groups—especially among Black Americans

Prisoners per 100,000 adults ages 18 and older in each group
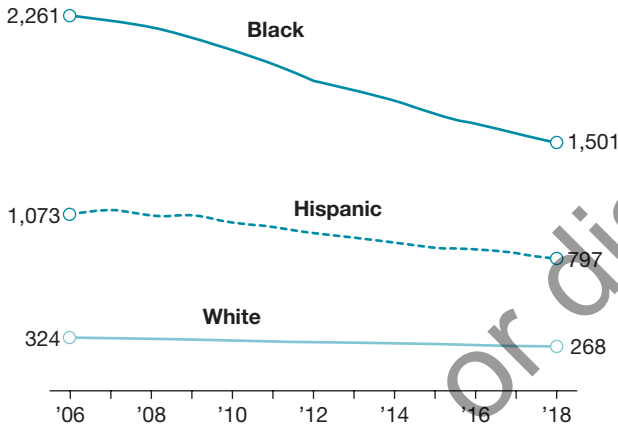
SOURCES: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Pew Research Center (2016).

NOTE: Blacks and whites include those who report being only race and are non-Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race. Prisoners are those sentenced to more than a year in state or federal prison.

Importantly, teachers should try to remain neutral facilitators in classroom discourse. Most parents will welcome this guardrail articulated from the start. The job of social studies teachers is to build the skills of discourse and the understanding about the nature of government, civil society, and how all interact within the private sphere of our lives. While both of us are passionate about many contentious topics in our personal lives, as teachers we try to keep our opinions about open, political questions largely unknown to students because it is their job to formulate their own opinions without undue influence from the teacher.

Finally, once you have articulated the vision and the parameters of discourse, it is time to communicate this with the

parent community. Does your school have a parent–teacher organization? If you worry that your parent community might react negatively to civil discourse, reach out to influential parents through small-group conversations. Practice many of the strategies outlined in the rest of this book, such as seeking understanding, establishing a sense of belonging, and practicing empathy when communicating with parents about the purpose of social studies instruction in your classroom, school, or district.

CLOSING REFLECTION

- What is the most compelling reason you read about why discomfort can no longer be avoided? Why does that resonate with you?

- How you would define the mission of your school to:
  o Your students?

  o Families of your students?

  o Community members?

  o Is it the same for all three? What role does having students engage in conversations about contentious topics play in meeting your mission?

- Why is it important that students be exposed to multiple perspectives in your classroom and school?

- How are the questions you use with students developed?

- Can you think of any compelling questions that you use with students that might need to be changed or adapted based on what you read?

Now that you have read this chapter, you should be able to complete the following:

✓ Find connections in your school or district mission or vision statements that support students engaging in civil discourse.

✓ In partnership with administrators, develop a vision statement for social studies education in your school or district that highlights the importance of civil discourse.

✓ Set parameters around which topics are open for discourse.

✓ Communicate the vision statement to parents and the larger community.

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