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How to End Self-Censorship in US High Schools

Analysis by Bill Kuhn | Bloomberg

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As Americans continue the necessary and difficult work of creating a more equitable and inclusive society, an unfortunate side effect has been the curtailment of free speech on high school and college campuses, and the emergence of pervasive self-censorship.

Colleges continue to cancel controversial speakers and acquiesce to unreasonable student demands. In a recent poll by College Pulse, 80% of students reported that they self-censored. In a much-read New York Times op-ed article, Emma Camp, a senior at the University of Virginia, wrote: “I welcomed an environment that champions intellectual diversity and rigorous disagreement. Instead ... students of all political persuasions hold back — in class discussions, in friendly conversations, on social media — from saying what we really think.”

But fewer Americans may know that the problem plagues high schools as well. In a recent Knight Foundation poll, only 19% of high school students were “very comfortable” voicing disagreement with ideas expressed by teachers or other students. A poll by Next Generation Politics, a student-run group in New York, found that 60% of students felt they “could not express their opinions on a subject because of how students, teachers or the administration would respond.”

Educators have been affected as well. In a recent RAND report, researchers found that controversies over subjects such as critical race theory, systemic racism and LGBTQ issues — aggravated by vitriolic disagreement over Covid-19 responses — have taken a heavy toll on teachers and principals, contributing to large numbers leaving the profession at a time of dire shortages. The report stated: “On top of the herculean task of carrying out the essential functions of their jobs, educators increasingly find themselves in the position of addressing contentious, politicized issues in their schools as the United States has experienced increasing political polarization.”

Peter Senge, author of the foundational book on systems theory, *The Fifth Discipline*, posits 11 principles of systems theory. The first is “today’s problems come from yesterday’s ‘solutions’.” That’s exactly what we are seeing in schools: Our necessary effort to expand our students’ perspectives on diversity, equity and inclusion has been met with the new problem of an educational climate that has abandoned the traditional belief that people can disagree but still find common ground.

This could have frightening consequences as future generations are taught — either directly or more likely indirectly — to self-censor and to engage in groupthink. Essential questions are being asked in our country, but if schools and colleges are unwilling to remain a place where those questions can be fully explored, where does the discourse take place?

This does not mean that the principles of DEI education — for diversity, equity and inclusion — shouldn’t be included in the curriculum. In fact, quite the opposite. Deconstructing and reconstructing what we teach to include material from non-White sources, bringing in more non-White students and faculty, and creating equitable learning environments are crucial changes if schools are to align with the wider world. However, they must also do more to ensure that educators can navigate this academic minefield of rights in conflict.

As the Head of School at the Birch Wathen Lenox School, a coeducational K-12 college prep institution in Manhattan, I have found this conflict is not dichotomous. An open forum of ideas can coexist with awareness and accountability in the curriculum. We fully embrace initiatives that are central to our programming and values while supporting students in learning how to think, not what to think. BWL’s statement of social values, written in collaboration by teachers, students and administrators, proclaims, “We embrace difficult conversations that faithfully promote intellectual and emotional risk-taking.”

Our teachers and students are trained in a variety of techniques to foster reasoned debate and constructive disagreement, and how not to get emotional, angry or shut others down because they disagree with one’s viewpoints. One initiative, the “Prefect Program,” prepares 11th and 12th grade students to have difficult conversations with their peers and underclassmen about gender, politics and race.

Prefects are chosen through a rigorous application process, evaluated by grades, community standing and leadership skills; once selected, they get training from experienced faculty and outside consultants who specialize in constructive dialogue. As one senior noted, “prefects help students have challenging conversations in class and the hallways because, from the first day of school, they open up and provide an ‘open floor’ to talk and discuss problems ... to listen and remain judgment-free.”

We also employ programs such as Mindfulness Stress Based Reduction, which has been found in comprehensive studies to reduce “stress, self-regulation, school-specific self-efficacy and interpersonal problems” for students and teachers alike. For the faculty, we promote professional development on the Socratic Method and its effectiveness in fostering reasoned debate. As one teacher shared, “I believe my seniors have grown as respectful communicators, it’s a wonderful thing.”

While a fixture of most students’ lives, social media is fertile ground for call-out culture and canceling their peers. We do not allow phones during school hours in middle school and limit their usage in the high school.

Concurrently, our commitment to having a diverse student body has grown stronger. Since 2018, BWL has increased the number of non-White students by one-third, going from 23% to 34% of total enrollment.

We are certainly not alone in trying to foster constructive disagreement. For example, Suffern High School in Suffern, New York, partnered with the Constructive Dialogue Institute for a 10-month academic program. The students learned active listening and paraphrasing strategies, techniques to “reset emotions” in order to engage with challenging topics, and presented a capstone project at the end of the course.

Schools do not have to choose between DEI curriculums and respect for free speech. But they need to make continuous efforts to ensure that the rights of all, including the right to hold unpopular opinions, are nurtured and respected.

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