

Back to School 2024

Creating Conditions for Difficult Conversations

A special note and resources from the Oregon Department of Education:

By nurturing an environment of respect and openness, educators, mentors and administrators can transform classrooms into havens where students feel empowered to explore, question, and confront the issues that matter most to them - it is imperative that we intentionally craft these spaces where difficult yet essential conversations can flourish. Wars, elections, violence, fires and more will be top of mind for many staff and students as we transition into the 2024-25 school year and will impact school settings in various ways. Together, let's create the conditions for meaningful dialogue both in and out of the classroom, guiding our students toward a future illuminated by empathy, courage, and a shared commitment to justice.

When students are practiced at skillful discourse and disagreement over minor issues, they will have the foundation to build upon when more complex topics and increasingly difficult moments arise. For these reasons, it is vital that we create brave and thoughtful spaces where students can come together and make sense of their lives and the wider world.

In an effort to support proactive approaches to creating these kinds of conditions for student conversations, other resources are included below for your consideration:

- Oregon Open Learning - [Debate and Discussion Protocols](#)
- Learning For Justice - on **Voting**
 - [Why Local Elections Matter](#)
 - [The Importance of Voting](#)
- Learning for Justice offers a number of guides, including [Let's Talk: Facilitating Critical Conversations with Students](#).
- Solution Tree - **Discussing Values**
 - [Examples of Values](#)
 - [Valuing Our Beliefs and Others](#)
 - [Developing Baseline Assumptions](#)
 - [Recognizing the Position of Others](#)
- Facing History - **Civil Discourse**
 - [Guidelines for Discussion](#)
 - [Discussing Issues that Matte](#)

- Solutions Not Sides - **Israel/Palestine**
 - [Discussing Israel/Palestine](#)
 - [Avoiding Antisemitic & Islamophobic Hate Speech](#)

Resources for adults:

- [Equity Decision Tools for School Leaders](#)
- Matthew R. Kay, author of [Not Light, But Fire](#) offers tips and suggestions for ways to create the conditions in schools and classrooms for students to have healthy dialogue.

Other resources:

- [Back to School: Building Community for Connection and Learning](#) - From Facing History & Ourselves: These back-to-school activities and teacher resources will help you lay a foundation for a reflective and caring community at the start of the school year.
- [Fostering Civil Discourse: How Do We Talk About Issues That Matter?](#) - From Facing History & Ourselves: The ideas and tools in this guide will help you prepare students to engage in reflective conversations on topics that matter.
- [From Reflection to Action: A Choosing to Participate Toolkit](#) - From Facing History & Ourselves: Students develop and strengthen their “participation muscles”—a combination of civic skills, knowledge, and dispositions—throughout the course of their time in school.
- [Let's Talk! Discussing Race, Racism, and Other Difficult Topics with Students](#) - From Learning for Justice: Strategies to assist teachers in preparing to facilitate difficult conversations about race and racism in the classroom.
- [Responding to Violence & Hate](#) - From Anti-Defamation League: This Curriculum for grades PreK–12 provides grade-specific lessons and resources that assist in addressing these difficult issues with children at home and in the classroom.
- Use the [Transformative SEL Framework and Standards](#) to create communities and hold conversations that center identity, agency, belonging, collaborative problem-solving, and curiosity.
- [Oregon Classroom WISE](#) offers many practices for creating safe and supportive learning environments and supporting students experiencing stress or distress.
- The [Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative](#) provides resources for creating trauma-sensitive learning environments that acknowledge the impacts of traumatic stress and events on individuals’ experiences.

- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network’s [Addressing Race and Trauma in the Classroom: A Resource for Educators](#) contains important strategies for addressing historical and racial trauma.
- [Oregon’s 2023 Health and Sexuality Education Standards](#) can guide K-12 classroom instruction to strengthen student skills and knowledge related to healthy relationships, violence and bullying prevention, diversity and identity, conflict and repair, values identification, and communication.

As you think about how to utilize specific resources, please remember:

First and foremost it is important to *set the conditions* that support wellbeing and belonging to ensure that conversations maintain human dignity, health, and safety.

Component 2 of the [Oregon Transformative SEL Framework](#) explicitly discusses creating conditions that undergird caring, equitable, just, and inclusive discourse. Universal TSEL practices foster conditions that deepen human connection and build trust so that students and adults, of diverse backgrounds, can discuss the complexities of social systems around them without fear of shame, embarrassment, or humiliation.

ODE’s [Integrated Model of Mental Health](#) also provides a framework for creating school cultures that promote wellbeing, belonging, and mutual respect. The model’s four pillars and [related practices](#) instill a foundation for supporting student learning, engagement, voice and choice by affirming their identities and ways of being and knowing, with the goal of fostering empathy, compassion, respect and understanding.

School cultures that support inclusive dialogue are built on this foundation.

The [Care and Connection Toolkit](#), ODE’s [Mental Health Toolkit](#), and [Oregon’s Transformational Social and Emotional Learning Framework and Standards](#) each provide practices and strategies for building safe, supportive, inclusive school cultures.