

## STUDENT WELL-BEING

# Students Learn to Put the 'Civil' in Civil Discourse



By [Catherine Gewertz](#) — November 27, 2018 | Corrected: December 18, 2018 ⌚ 7 min read



"I got more comfortable with people disagreeing. ... I started to realize that everyone is compelled by what they think is best for everyone. They're not good or evil." Bintou Sonko, a senior at Overland High School, near Denver, reflects on the civic discussions in her social studies classes this year.

— Nathan W. Arnes for Education Week



*Corrected: An earlier version of this story incorrectly described Diana Hess's connection to the book, *The Political Classroom*. She is a co-author of the book.*

*In addition, several of the photo captions accompanying an earlier version of this article contained an incorrect name for the high school in Colorado. It is Overland High School.*

*Aurora, Colo.*

Inside this high school at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, teenagers are immersed in a project with the potential to temper the divisiveness that is consuming U.S. politics. They're learning to have calm, balanced conversations about controversial issues.

In two very ordinary classrooms here, students are aware that they're trying to do something extraordinary, something many adults around them seem unable to do: study a problem, understand the arguments on all sides, and discuss it together to see what solutions might work best for the country.

?

Educators around the country who are involved in teaching these civil-discourse skills say the need for them has become especially urgent as increasingly heated political rhetoric exposes the degree to which Americans are polarized and free-speech rights are under fire.

“It’s just a whole lot of yelling and finger-pointing out there, people talking over each other instead of hearing each other out,” said Lindsey Johnson, an 11th grade student who’s learning civil-discourse skills here at Overland High School, near Denver.

“I’m usually the kind of person who [says], ‘I think this, and that’s what I’m going with.’ But I had to open up and hear what people have to say and listen, to bring it all together.” Ty’Leesha Stanley reflects after taking part in a “deliberation” in her social studies class at Overland High School, near Denver. The structured discussions are meant to help students learn to talk reasonably and calmly about divisive topics.

— Nathan W. Arnes for Education Week

“The sooner we can learn these habits, the sooner we can make things better.”

Lindsey’s American Government class had just finished a “deliberation,” or structured civil discourse, about whether Congress should outlaw assault weapons. Students pushed their desks into groups of four, then read a packet of materials that summarized key issues about gun violence and outlined a dozen arguments for and against an assault-weapons ban.

Working in pairs, the students chose what they thought were the strongest two arguments on the “pro” or “con” side. They discussed them with the other two students in their group. Then they switched sides in the argument and discussed the issue again as a foursome.

## Seeing the Other Side

Mariah Perez and her partner, Faith Koudawo, quickly filled the side of their worksheet that is set aside for supportive arguments. But the side for arguments against a ban stayed blank. For a long time.

### ABOUT THE CITIZEN Z PROJECT

U.S. public education is rooted in the belief by early American leaders that the most important knowledge to impart to young people is what it means to be a citizen. If America is experiencing a civic crisis now, as many say it is, schools may well be failing at that job. Look for more pieces from our Citizen Z project in the weeks and months ahead.

Mariah struggled. She came to class believing that outlawing assault weapons was a good idea. It’s a deeply resonant issue here, where 12 people died in a shooting at the Century 16 movie theater in 2012, and the 1999 Columbine High School shooting took 13 lives only a half-hour’s drive away. On the very day students are discussing how their country should confront gun violence, a man opened fire on a nightclub in Thousand Oaks, Calif., killing 12 people.

Scanning the list of arguments against an assault-weapons ban, Mariah resisted. How could having those weapons on the street be a good idea? But then something shifted. She went back to an argument that had caught her eye. American gun ownership has “deep historical roots” in protecting citizens from a tyrannical government, it said. “I wouldn’t have thought about that before,” she said.

Overland High School student, Jayla Jackson, 17, discusses compulsory voting with classmates during a U.S. Government class last month in Aurora, Colo.  
— Nathan W. Armes for Education Week

With that door cracked open, Mariah and Faith took another look at the list of arguments against an assault-weapons ban. They chose two they thought were the strongest, including the 2nd Amendment's guarantee of the right to own guns. Then they joined the pro and con arguments volleying in the whole-class discussion.

In the end, Mariah didn't change her stance. She still favors a ban. But she said that "seeing different views and opinions opened my mind and helped me understand" the issue better.

In another classroom downstairs, the next day, another group of students held a deliberation, this time on whether the United States should require its citizens to vote.

Like their classmates who discussed gun control, they had to abide by rules designed to promote good discussion, such as encouraging others to speak and approaching both sides "with an open mind."

"You may not argue yet. And you might have a really hard time with that," their teacher, Kelly Waggy-Jones, said as students began the exercise. "But at this point, try to suspend judgment. Now's the time to identify arguments, present evidence, and listen."

## A Step Beyond Debate

Many schools teach debate, where the goal is to construct a winning argument. But fewer teach how to consider opposing views on flammable issues and engage in informed dialogue about possible policy solutions. Overland High—and 23 other schools—are using an approach designed by a civics organization called Street Law, Inc. But pockets of educators around the country are using other means to instill civil-discourse habits.

"It's tough to argue the side you're not on. But it's important to understand other people's views." Luis Portillo reflects after taking part in a "deliberation" in his social studies class at Overland High School, near Denver. The structured discussions are meant to help students learn to talk reasonably and calmly about divisive topics.

— Nathan W. Armes for Education Week

"It's scary to talk about hard things. What if the conversation gets heated?" said Julie Rogers Bascom, a Minnesota educator. "But if we don't, we lose an important opportunity to teach kids how to have conversations without being a winner, how to understand multiple perspectives to solve problems."

Bascom helps teachers and students in the St. Paul, Minn., area learn how to conduct "respectful conversations" in their classrooms. Her approach was adapted from a protocol that Minnesota churches created to facilitate calmer conversations about gay marriage.

Teachers say they notice students getting personal and aggressive in disagreements.

"Doing deliberations allows us to understand the whole issue, not just what we hear in social media, and from our parents and the people at school." Sammie Shellman reflects after taking part in a "deliberation" in her social studies class at Overland High School, near Denver. The structured discussions

are meant to help students learn to talk reasonably and calmly about divisive topics.

— Nathan W. Armes for Education Week

“I’ve been teaching for eight years, and I’ve noticed that students seem to get heated much more quickly now,” said Steve Caudill, a social studies teacher in Bremen, Ind. “I’ve had to double up on reminders about personal attacks and arguing with reason and respect.”

To manage those situations without curtailing class debate, Caudill has stepped up his use of strategies to foster good dialogue. He insists students back up statements with evidence. And when students begin to speak, they must restate what the previous classmate said, to affirm that they listened.

Building those skills is an important part of providing a safe place for students to explore ideas as they’re forming their political views, said Peter Bonilla, the vice president of programs at the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education.

FIRE has focused on challenging colleges’ decisions to ban conservative speakers on campus. But it’s expanding its work into high schools because teachers have been saying they need curriculum and instructional strategies to handle controversial topics, Bonilla said.

“It’s important to keep things open and mutually civil so students can feel free to make mistakes, to argue points they might later come to disagree with,” he said. “Both liberal and conservative students can feel outnumbered in discussion and reluctant to discuss their views, depending on the classroom.”

## Historical Roots

Wading into controversial political topics in a deliberative mindset—where students build knowledge of an issue, explore all sides, and seek consensus on solutions—is fundamental to civic engagement, said Diana Hess, the dean of the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s school of education and co-author of the 2014 book, *The Political Classroom*.

Students who learn in that kind of environment are more likely to vote, engage in political conversations outside the classroom, and listen to people with whom they disagree, Hess’ research has found.

Although many teachers don’t feel they have the support, skills, or time to use deliberative conversation models in their classes, efforts to involve students in those kinds of discussions are hardly new. They date back to Aristotle’s idea of “deliberate discourse,” and have gained traction periodically in K-12 classrooms. The “new social studies” movement of the 1960s and 1970s encouraged such inquiry-driven approaches.

Street Law’s program is an outgrowth of work in the 1980s by two Minnesota researchers who designed a class discussion model known as “structured academic controversy.”

Scholars seeking to define critical aspects of high-quality civics instruction have repeatedly singled out deliberative discussion as important. A seminal report on civics instruction, “The Civic Mission of Schools,” in

2003, and a follow-up report in 2011, “Guardian of Democracy,” both list deliberative discussion about controversial topics as one of six important practices in good civics teaching.

It’s hard to document the extent to which teachers are using these strategies, and whether there’s been an increase in response to the rising political vitriol on the national stage. But anecdotally, teachers say they need structured ways to discuss difficult topics with students. And students report that their eyes—and minds—have opened by participating in them.

Bintou Sonko, an Overland senior, said the more time she spends in deliberations, the easier it is to understand perspectives different from hers. In her first discussion, about gun control, “everyone was just in their chair, silent and mad,” she said. By the second, which focused on whether citizens should be required to vote, she knew she’d have to argue both sides, and was “more open to it.”

“Instead of just hearing, I was actually listening,” she said. “I started to realize that everyone is compelled by what they think is best for everyone. They’re not good or evil.”



**Catherine Gewertz**

FOLLOW

Senior Contributing Writer, Education Week

Catherine Gewertz is a writer for Education Week who covers national news and features.



**Related Tags:**

Civics

Student Motivation & Engagement

Colorado

Coverage of civics education and youth voters is supported in part by the Education Writers Association Reporting Fellowship Program. A version of this article appeared in the November 28, 2018 edition of *Education Week* as *Teaching Civility in an Age of Conflict*

**CITIZEN Z: AN EDUCATION WEEK PROJECT**