

ELEMENTARY TO HIGH SCHOOL

OPINION: ‘Remaining silent is a political act’

Creating opportunities for parties to come together while teaching in trying times

by ERIKA KITZMILLER and ADELE BRUNI ASHLEY
November 8, 2018



The Hechinger Report is a national nonprofit newsroom that reports on one topic: education. Sign up for our [weekly newsletters](#) to get stories like this delivered directly to your inbox.

Pipe bombs. People murdered because of their skin color or religion. The possible end of federal protections for transgender people.

These recent horrific events may have occurred outside school walls, but the associated trauma and fear are spilling into our classrooms.

Teachers are struggling to find ways to support their students and to create meaningful curricula for children who may or may not understand the effects of these events in their lives.

In 2017, UCLA’s [Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access](#) surveyed 1,535 teachers from over three hundred geographically and demographically diverse public high schools, asking them to reflect on their experiences from January to May of that year.

Through both [this survey](#) and subsequent teacher interviews, the institute found that 51.4 percent of teachers reported that more students were experiencing “high levels of stress and anxiety” than in previous years; teachers pointed to heightened student concerns about immigration status, healthcare and LGBT rights. Meanwhile, 27 percent of teachers reported increases in derogatory remarks made by students during class discussions, and 72.3 percent of teachers agreed that they needed more guidance from school leadership and more opportunities for professional development around the promotion of civil exchange.

We understand that everyone might not agree on the particulars of these issues, and that some individuals might feel that discussing these topics is too political for schools or educators. But remaining silent is a political act. Moreover, silence does nothing to address the real and significant challenges that our schools face today.

In a 1963 [talk to teachers](#), James Baldwin said: “The paradox of education is precisely this — that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. ... The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it — at no matter what risk.”

For educators committed to the civic and political education that Baldwin described over 50 years ago, this fight requires the support of others. It requires courageous leaders — like those affiliated with [Bend the Arc](#) — who are willing to organize and mobilize their communities in acts of civil disobedience and democratic dissent.

“As teacher-educators ourselves, we know that we can all afford to work in isolation no longer; the future of our democracy is at stake.”

It requires networks of individuals willing to demonstrate their anger and outrage at incidents that target the Jewish community and other minority groups. It requires brave educators willing to help students reflect on the pressing concerns in our nation brought on by the rise in hateful rhetoric and deeds like the ones that have occurred over the past two weeks.

And we contend that it requires substantive opportunities for these parties to come together — for leaders, activists, educators and youth to share their experiences, their ideas and their evolving questions. Intent on creating this kind of forum, we have organized a network called “[Teaching in Trying Times](#),” which includes educators, youth, families, activists and academics who meet regularly and come together in the spring for an annual conference hosted at Teachers College, Columbia University.

This group discusses both theoretical and practical approaches to civic and political education, asking: *How do we respond to unfolding political events in our classrooms? How might we, as Baldwin urges, encourage our students “to examine society and try to change it and to fight it — at no matter what risk”?*

As teacher-educators ourselves, we know that we can all afford to work in isolation no longer; the future of our democracy is at stake. Through movements like Black Lives Matter (#BLM), Never Again (#NeverAgain) and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (#Dreamers), our students are already fighting. They are depending on us to act alongside them. We invite you to join the conversation.

This story on [social and emotional learning](#) was produced by [The Hechinger Report](#), a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for our [newsletter](#).

Want to write your own Op-Ed?

We consider all submissions under 900 words.

[Read our guidelines here.](#)

Erika M. Kitzmiller and Adele Bruni Ashley are lecturers in the Department of Arts and Humanities at Teachers College, Columbia University, and co-founders of [Teaching in Trying Times](#).

Related articles

- [Have lessons about Mississippi’s violent past become optional?](#)
- [“Thinking computer” that won on Jeopardy could help teachers](#)
- [Should teachers be apolitical?](#)

The Hechinger Report provides in-depth, fact-based, unbiased reporting on education that is free to all readers. But that doesn’t mean it’s free to produce. Our work keeps educators and the public informed about pressing issues at schools and on campuses throughout the country. We tell the whole story, even when the details are inconvenient. Help us keep doing that.

[Join us today.](#)

TAGGED: [OPINION](#) [SOCIAL EMOTIONAL](#) [TEACHERS](#)

Erika Kitzmiller
Erika M. Kitzmiller Ph.D. is a lecturer in the program in Social Studies at Teachers College, Columbia University and a Research Associate at Harvard University’s Hutchins Center. A historian of race,... [More by Erika Kitzmiller](#)

Adele Bruni Ashley
Adele Bruni Ashley is a lecturer at Teachers College, Columbia University’s Department of Arts and Humanities and co-founder of Teaching in Trying Times. [More by Adele Bruni Ashley](#)

Letters to the Editor ■ 1 Letter

At The Hechinger Report, we publish thoughtful letters from readers that contribute to the ongoing discussion about the education topics we cover. Please read our [guidelines](#) for more information.

By submitting your name, you grant us permission to publish it with your letter. We will never publish your email. You must fill out all fields to submit a letter.

Joe Sacco
November 8, 2018 at 7:35 pm

Is it truly sad that your idea of education “obligates examining society and try to change it and to fight it — at no matter what risk.” and that you call for blatant organization and mobilization of students to inflict acts of civil disobedience on their communities.

It’s no wonder the U.S. education system is the laughing stock of the world, as we descend into lower and lower depths of literacy and civic understanding. Even colleges are no longer requiring SAT/ACT test scores— because students can’t pass standards-based tests. (Even AFTER “recentering” (raising all scores arbitrarily as students fail) in 1996! Education has turned from understanding math and language arts into political “debates,” where supposed teachers lead students to fight Western values and denigrate the foundations of the United States. When adults drum up victimhood and discord, then complain about the toxic “political environment,” it is the definition of irony. Have you ever considered your role in the toxic environment? (Hint: it’s only exacerbating what you supposedly oppose.)

Submit a letter

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Letter

Name * Email *

Website

Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.

Notify me by email when the comment gets approved.

Type of Letter

[Post Letter](#)