

TEACHING THE 2016 ELECTION

# *The Trump Effect*

*The impact of the presidential campaign on our nation's schools*

SPLC



Southern Poverty Law Center



TEACHING THE 2016 ELECTION

# *The Trump Effect*

*The impact of the presidential campaign on our nation's schools*

BY MAUREEN B. COSTELLO

#### **ABOUT THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER**

The Southern Poverty Law Center, based in Montgomery, Alabama, is a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) civil rights organization founded in 1971 and dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry, and to seeking justice for the most vulnerable members of society. It neither endorses political candidates nor engages in electioneering activities.

#### **ABOUT TEACHING TOLERANCE**

Founded in 1991, Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, is dedicated to reducing prejudice, improving intergroup relations and supporting equitable school experiences for our nation's children.

The program provides free educational materials, including *Perspectives for a Diverse America*, a K-12 anti-bias curriculum. *Teaching Tolerance* magazine is sent to more than 400,000 educators, reaching nearly every school in the country. Tens of thousands of educators use the program's film kits, and more than 7,000 schools participate in the annual Mix It Up at Lunch Day program.

Teaching Tolerance materials have won two Oscars<sup>®</sup>, an Emmy and dozens of REVERE Awards from the Association of American Publishers, including two Golden Lamps, the industry's highest honor. The program's website and social media pages offer thought-provoking news, conversation and support for educators who care about diversity, equal opportunity and respect for differences in schools.

To download this report, visit [splcenter.org](http://splcenter.org).

## **CONTENTS**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
PART ONE: IMPACT ON STUDENTS	6
PART TWO: IMPACT ON TEACHING	12
ABOUT THE SURVEY	15
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	16

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EVERY FOUR YEARS, teachers in the United States use the presidential election to impart valuable lessons to students about the electoral process, democracy, government and the responsibilities of citizenship.

But, for students and teachers alike, this year's primary season is starkly different from any in recent memory. The results of an online survey conducted by Teaching Tolerance suggest that the campaign is having a profoundly negative effect on children and classrooms.

It's producing an alarming level of fear and anxiety among children of color and inflaming racial and ethnic tensions in the classroom. Many students worry about being deported.

Other students have been emboldened by the divisive, often juvenile rhetoric in the campaign. Teachers have noted an increase in bullying, harassment and intimidation of students whose races, religions or nationalities have been the verbal targets of candidates on the campaign trail.

Educators are perplexed and conflicted about what to do. They report being stymied by the need to remain nonpartisan but disturbed by the anxiety in their classrooms and the lessons that children may be absorbing from this campaign.

Two responses from teachers illustrate their dilemma. A teacher in Arlington, Virginia, says, "I try to not bring it up since it is so stressful for my students." Another, in Indianapolis, Indiana, says, "I am at a point where I'm going to take a stand even if it costs me my position."

Our survey of approximately 2,000 K-12 teachers was not scientific. Our email subscribers and those who visit our website are not a random sample of teachers nationally, and those who chose to respond to our survey are likely to be those who

are most concerned about the impact of the presidential campaign on their students and schools.

But the data we collected is the richest source of information that we know of about the effect of the presidential campaign on education in our country. And there is nothing counterintuitive about the results. They show a disturbing nationwide problem, one that is particularly acute in schools with high concentrations of minority children.

Here are the highlights:

- More than two-thirds of the teachers reported that students—mainly immigrants, children of immigrants and Muslims—have expressed concerns or fears about what might happen to them or their families after the election.
- More than half have seen an increase in uncivil political discourse.
- More than one-third have observed an increase in anti-Muslim or anti-immigrant sentiment.
- More than 40 percent are hesitant to teach about the election.



Teachers report their students from immigrant families are anxious about a wall between the U.S. and Mexico and fearful they will be deported.

---

## “The word ‘Trump’ is enough to derail a class.” PAMPA, TEXAS

The comments are particularly revealing.

The survey did not identify any candidates. But out of 5,000 total comments, more than 1,000 mentioned Donald Trump. In contrast, a total of fewer than 200 contained the names Ted Cruz, Bernie Sanders or Hillary Clinton. During the campaign, Trump has spoken of deporting millions of Latino immigrants, building a wall between the United States and Mexico, banning Muslim immigrants and even killing the families of Islamist terrorists. He has also called Mexican immigrants “rapists” and drug dealers.

“My students are terrified of Donald Trump,” says one teacher from a middle school with a large population of African-American Muslims. “They think that if he’s elected, all black people will get sent back to Africa.”

In state after state, teachers report similar fears among minority children.

In Virginia, an elementary school teacher says students are “crying in the classroom and having meltdowns at home.” In Oregon, a K-3 teacher says her black students are “concerned for their safety because of what they see on TV at Trump rallies.” In North Carolina, a high school teacher says she has “Latino students who carry their birth certificates and Social Security cards to school because they are afraid they will be deported.”

Some of the stories are heartbreaking. In Tennessee, a kindergarten teacher says a Latino child—told by classmates that he will be deported and trapped behind a wall—asks every day, “Is the wall here yet?”

Many children, however, are not afraid at all. Rather, some are using the word Trump as a taunt or as a chant as they gang up on others. Muslim children are being called *terrorist* or *ISIS* or *bomber*.

“Students are hearing more hate language than I have ever heard at our school before,” says a high school teacher in Helena, Montana. Another teacher reports that a fifth-grader told a Muslim student “that he was supporting Donald Trump because he was going to kill all of the Muslims if he became president!”

The long-term impact on children’s well-being,

their behavior or their civic education is impossible to gauge. Some teachers report that their students are highly engaged and interested in the political process this year. Others worry that the election is making them “less trusting of government” or “hostile to opposing points of view,” or that children are “losing respect for the political process.”

For the sake of children and their education, presidential candidates should begin modeling the kind of civil behavior and civic values that we all want children to learn in school. Barring such a change in tone, however, teachers and school administrators will face an uphill battle. Remaining impartial will be difficult when the students’ conversation revolves largely around Trump.

But we urge educators not to abandon their teaching about the election, to use instances of incivility as teaching moments, and to support the children who are hurt, confused and frightened by what they’re hearing from the candidates. Our specific findings from the survey follow. ▶

## *Impact on Students*

EVERY STUDENT, from preschoolers up through high school, is aware of the tone, rhetoric and catch-phrases of this particular campaign season. Students are hearing conversations at home. They're chatting, posting and joking on social media. Whether teachers decide to bring it into the classroom or not, kids are talking about it, modeling their behavior on that of political candidates and bringing heightened emotion to school along with their backpacks.

One California teacher noted, "YouTube, Instagram and Twitter make everything 'live' and interactive." Some students attend candidates' rallies. And then there is the endless cycle of talk radio, 24-hour news and cable comedy shows. "The explosive headlines and conversations have caught their attention," a middle school teacher in Providence, Rhode Island, wrote about her students. "They want to talk about a cartoon/headline/video they saw."

The 2016 campaign and the antics of its contestants are omnipresent. As one Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, elementary school teacher told us, "Shying away from difficult conversations doesn't mean the conversations aren't taking place." A Portland, Oregon, middle school teacher reported that her principal had imposed a "gag order" on teachers, prohibiting them from talking about the election. But the order didn't stop one of her students from telling an immigrant classmate, "When Trump wins, you and your family will get sent back." On the survey she posed the question, "What does a teacher do? I can assure you that if a student says that loudly and brazenly in class, far worse is happening in the hallway."

For almost all students, the campaign is personal and their support or opposition to candidates—actually to one candidate mainly—is intense. But the

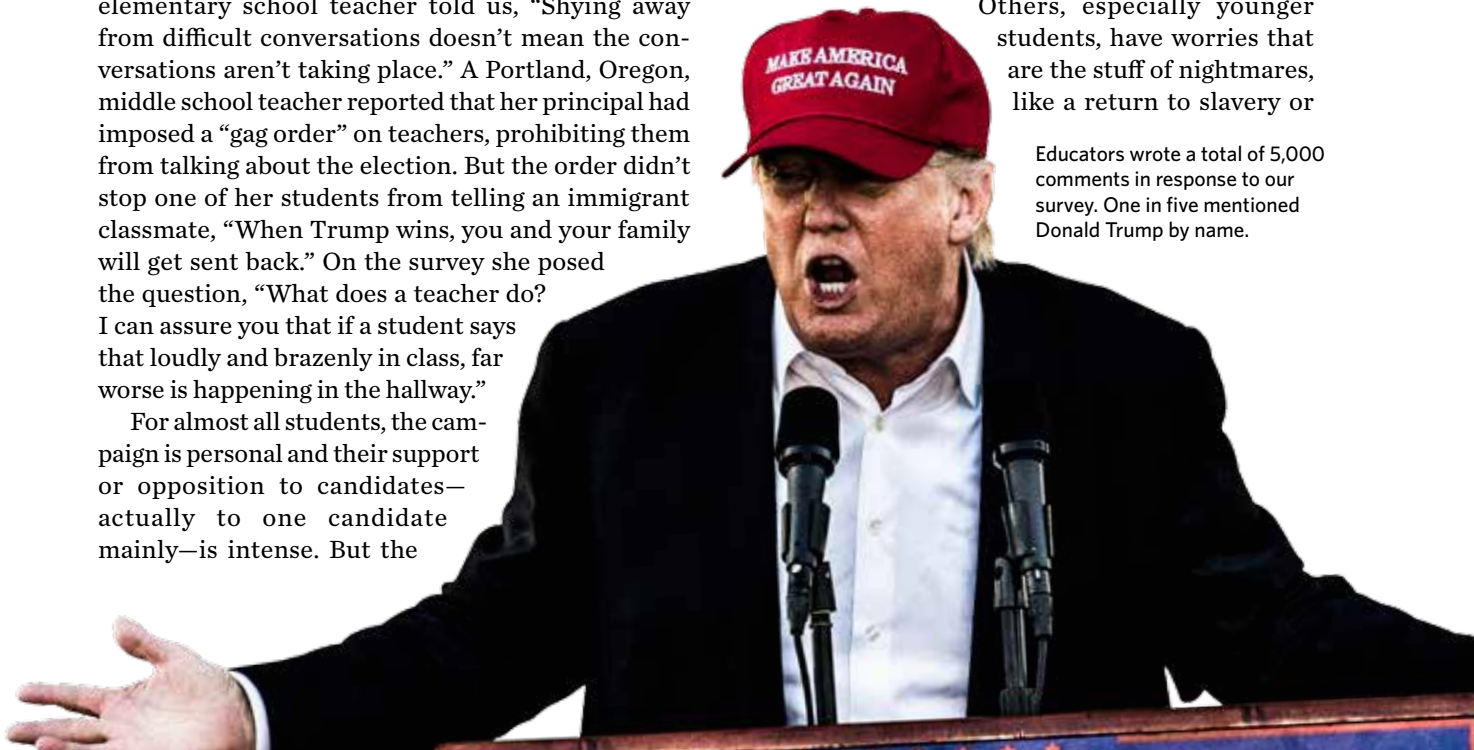
effect of the campaign on students depends very much on where they stand in the school pecking order. Those who have been marginalized in the past are bearing the brunt of behavior and comments that often cross over into abuse.

### **MARGINALIZED STUDENTS ARE "TERRIFIED"**

Over two-thirds (67 percent) of educators reported that young people in their schools—most often immigrants, children of immigrants, Muslims, African Americans and other students of color—had expressed concern about what might happen to them or their families after the election. Close to one-third of the students in American classrooms are children of foreign-born parents. This year, they are scared, stressed and in need of reassurance and support from teachers. Muslim children are harassed and worried. Even native-born African-American children, whose families arrived here before the American Revolution, ask about being sent back to Africa.

Others, especially younger students, have worries that are the stuff of nightmares, like a return to slavery or

Educators wrote a total of 5,000 comments in response to our survey. One in five mentioned Donald Trump by name.





being rounded up and put into camps. Overall, these vulnerable students are disillusioned and depressed at the hatred they're hearing from candidates, in the news, from classmates and even, sometimes, from trusted adults. They're discouraged to find out what people really think. Teachers struggle to help them feel safe.

Undocumented students or students with undocumented family members are especially vulnerable. These students have a legal right to a public school education, but many of them come to school every day fearful that their families will be separated. Teachers, in general, are very protective of students and sensitive to their pain.

Fears are pervasive. Students tell teachers they are worried about deportation, having their families split, being put in jail or attacked by police, losing their homes, seeing their places of worship closed, going into hiding and being sent to detention camps. Some Muslim students think that, if Trump becomes president, they will have microchips implanted under their skin.

Students are stressed and anxious in a way that is threatening their health, emotional well-being and their schoolwork. We heard from dozens of educators about young students who expressed daily worries about "being sent back" or having their parents sent back. In many cases, the students are American citizens or come from families that are here legally. It doesn't matter: Regardless of immigration status, they feel under attack. We heard about students from second grade to high school crying in class.

A Tennessee kindergarten teacher reported that she has a student who asks her every day if the wall has been built yet. "Imagine the fear in my students' eyes when they look to me for the truth," she said.

In Massachusetts, an elementary school social



Anti-Muslim sentiment in the U.S. has risen steadily since the 2016 election season began. Schools are no exception.

worker described what was happening to her 8-year-old son, who was adopted from Korea. "He came home from school and recounted a conversation he'd had with his friends on the playground. Many ... come from immigrant families and/or are black or brown. He told me they know that if Donald Trump [sic] was elected that we would have to move to another continent to be safe and that there would be a big war. He is very nervous about being sent away with my husband who is also Korean American."

Stressed students have a harder time learning, and we saw many reports that anxiety was having an impact on grades and ability to concentrate. In Washington state, a teacher told us about a 10-year-old boy who can't sleep at night because he is worried his immigrant parents will be sent away. A California art teacher described a fifth-grader who had begun having "full-blown panic attacks." After fellow students in Washington state had repeatedly shouted slurs from their cars at one Muslim teenager, her

---

**"My kids are terrified of Trump becoming president. They believe he can/will deport them—and NONE of them are Hispanic. They are all African American." OKLAHOMA**



Students in Merrillville, Indiana, found themselves in the news after chanting, “Build a wall!” during a basketball game against a rival team made up of mostly Latino players.

teacher reported, the girl expressed suicidal thoughts.

For immigrants whose home countries are unsafe places to which they can’t return, the fear is “tremendous and profound.” One teacher observed that the campaign season is particularly traumatizing for students who have “suffered through exile, migration and even asylum.” Others reported that their Iraqi and Syrian students are terrified of being sent back to their war-torn countries.

They’re not just scared. Teachers used words like “hurt” and “dejected” to describe the impact on their charges. The ideas and language coming from the presidential candidates are bad enough, but many students—Muslim, Hispanic and African-American—are far more upset by the number of people, including classmates and even teachers, who seem to agree with Trump. They are struggling with the belief that “everyone hates them.”

An elementary school administrator in Vancouver, Washington, wrote, “Students who had undocumented family members and relatives are afraid of what other kids will think of them if they find out. One [fourth-grade] student reported that she thought everyone hated her because her mother was illegal and she didn’t want to come to school. Over 35 percent of our students are Mexican. I’ve never had this ... before this year.”

African-American students aren’t exempt from the fears. Many teachers reported an increase in use of the n-word as a slur, even among very young children. And black children are burdened with a particularly awful fear that has been reported from teachers in many states—that they will “be deported to Africa” or that slavery will be reinstated. As an Oklahoma elementary teacher explains, “My kids are terrified of Trump becoming [p]resident. They believe he can/will deport them—and NONE of them are Hispanic. They are all African American.”

Even in schools where a majority of students are African American and don’t face racial taunts on the playground, students feel uneasy. A teacher in Ferguson,

Missouri, where nearly nine out of 10 students are African American, says, “We do not have the language and hate of any candidates repeated at the high school where I teach. ... However, I do hear students wonder if they are being let in on what all white people truly think and feel. This is so disappointing and hard to combat.”

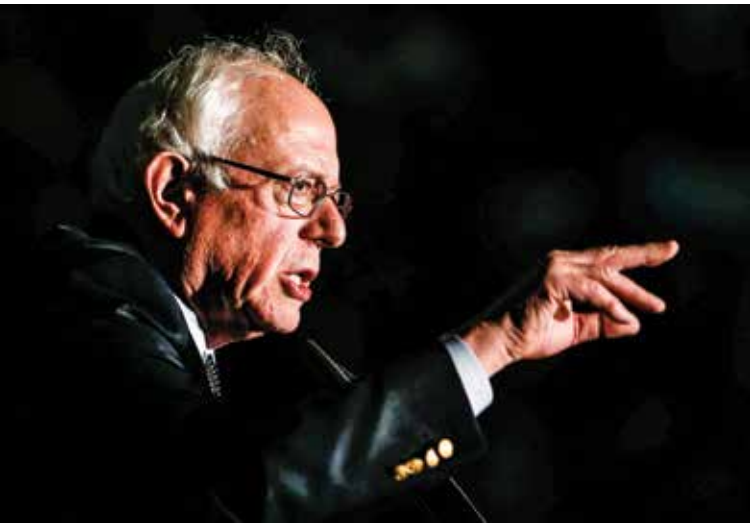
According to their teachers, these vulnerable students feel that Trump is a “rich racist who hates them.” Young children can’t understand why people hate them without even knowing them. One teacher’s comment, “It breaks my heart,” was echoed by dozens of others.

Another wrote simply that, in her diverse school, “My students have one thing in common. Apparently America hates them.”

Students are confused. Their teachers have worked hard—and often successfully—to teach them about American ideals. They are, according to one Boston high school teacher, “confused as to how a person who has no respect for American ideals can be so

---

“My fifth-graders got in a fist fight on the playground yesterday. It started when one of the boys quoted Donald Trump.” QUEENS, NEW YORK



popular.” On one hand, they are taught that the United States is a nation of immigrants, but their current experience doesn’t match the lesson. Many immigrant students feel that “they don’t belong here” and they have “no value” to the country.

All students, regardless of whether they are members of targeted groups, are vulnerable to the stress. Kids are worried about their friends and want to protect them. A Minnesota teacher wrote about her own middle school daughter who felt terribly guilty after

Educators report that students seem highly engaged in the 2016 election, but worry that it’s for the wrong reasons.

a “dear Muslim friend was called a ‘terrorist’ by another classmate.” The teacher reported, “We had a lengthy conversation about what to do if there was a ‘next time.’”

Teachers struggle to provide safety in their classrooms and reassurance to their students. Often that means breaking their usual rule against discussing their own politics and assuring children who “beg [them] not to vote for Trump because he will send their parents out of the country” that, indeed, they will not. Others try to explain how our system actually works, underscoring the point that the president alone doesn’t make laws, or that it’s unlikely Mr. Trump will actually be elected. But, as one California teacher explained, “I have tried to reassure my students that no matter the outcome, they will be okay. I don’t even know if that’s true, but I can’t have them worry and stress about it.”

Teachers work to keep their classrooms respectful. Often that means constant reminders that the rules for classroom discussion aren’t the same as the rules on the debate stage. Sometimes it means declaring some things off limits. “I really don’t want to have his [Trump’s] name invoked in my classroom,” said a teacher from Pennsylvania. “It feels like it makes it an unsafe place for my students of color.”

And often, it means expressing affection. A teacher at a Virginia Title I (high poverty) school where nearly

---

“At the all-white school where I teach, ‘dirty Mexican’ has become a common insult. Before election season it was never heard.” WISCONSIN

two-thirds of the students are Hispanic said, “My second-graders are scared. They’re scared of being sent back to their home countries. They’re scared of losing their education. As their teacher, I hug them each day to let them know they are safe and they are loved.”

### STUDENTS SEEM “EMBOLDENED”

The gains made by years of anti-bullying work in schools have been rolled back in a few short months. Teachers report that students have been “emboldened” to use slurs, engage in name-calling and make inflammatory statements toward each other. When confronted, students point to the candidates and claim they are “just saying what everyone is thinking.” Kids use the names of candidates as pejoratives to taunt each other.

If marginalized students are fearful and hurting, it’s partly because other “students seem emboldened to make bigoted and inflammatory statements about minorities, immigrants, the poor, etc.,” wrote a high school teacher in Michigan.

Teachers in New Hampshire—where the first primary was held—reported some of the greatest increases in disturbing behavior. One high school teacher from Westmoreland wrote, “A lot of students think we should kill any and all people we do not agree with. They also think that all Muslims are the same and are a threat to our country and way of life. They believe all Muslims want to kill us.”

Muslim students—along with the Sikh and Hindu students who are mistaken for Muslims—have endured heightened levels of abuse. According to reports from around the nation, Muslim students regularly endure being called *ISIS*, *terrorist* or *bomber*. These opinions are expressed boldly and often. Even in schools where such behavior isn’t tolerated, current-events discussions often become uncomfortable for teachers and Muslim students.

The harassment of students who are immigrants or children of immigrants is another particular problem, because nearly one-third of U.S. public school students have foreign-born parents. Teachers in every state reported hostile language aimed at immigrants, mainly Mexicans. A Wisconsin middle school teacher told us, “Openly racist statements towards Mexican students have increased. Mexican students are worried.” A middle school teacher in Anaheim, California, reported, “Kids tell other kids that soon they will be deported.” Regardless of their ethnic background or even their immigration or citizenship status, targeted students are taunted with talk of a wall or threats of forcible removal.

Neither are the slurs limited to schools with immigrant populations. “At the all-white school where I teach, ‘dirty Mexican’ has become a common insult,” a Wisconsin middle school educator said. “Before election season it was never heard.” Indeed, what teachers described—slurs and negative comments repeatedly directed at particular students or groups of students—is essentially the definition of bullying. In recent years, a large swath of the American public has been alerted to the dangerous effect of bullying on school children. It affects health, academic achievement and, in some cases, leads to self-harm. As a result of efforts at both the state and federal levels, schools now have comprehensive policies and programs to prevent and address bullying. In many schools, these programs have made a real difference in creating a culture of respect. The educators who reported that the election wasn’t having too much of an effect cited their school’s values and commitment to civility.

In other places, much of that hard work—achieved over years—is being undone. A Michigan middle school teacher described an exchange that followed an anti-bullying assembly: “I had students tell me it [insults, name-calling, trash talk] isn’t bullying, they’re just ‘telling it like it is.’”

Or, as a New Mexico high school teacher lamented, “Any unity developed by Mix It Up at lunchtime has flown out the window.”

“Students do not understand why this has become such an angry and dishonorable campaign. They are taught better behavior by their teachers, and then they see this mess on TV and are confused.”

OMAK, WASHINGTON

“Openly racist statements towards Mexican students have increased. Mexican students are worried.” ANAHEIM, CALIFORNIA

“Students have become very hostile to opposing points of view, regardless of the topic. Any division now elicits anger and personal attacks.” JEFFERSON, GEORGIA

It's not just that "they seem to talk more smack," as one Sacramento, California, elementary teacher wrote. The campaign has actually become part of the new bullying vocabulary. One New Orleans teacher told us, "Students have used support of candidates as a 'dis.'"

We heard reports that both elementary and middle school students have taken to chanting, "Trump! Trump! Trump!" in a "taunting tone." Others cited an increase in the use of words like *loser* and *deadbeat*. The bullying crosses party lines. An Albuquerque, New Mexico, middle school teacher identified "an anti-Trump bias" among her students, "and ridicule for those who might support Trump."

### **BEHAVIOR IS HARDER TO MANAGE—AND EXPLAIN**

Teachers report an increase in anger and "acting out" among students and a decreased ability to engage in civil discourse. Discussions turn into shouting matches, verbal hostility and sometimes even fights.

"Students have become very hostile to opposing points of view, regardless of the topic," a Jefferson, Georgia, high school teacher wrote, adding, "Any division now elicits anger and personal attacks."

In Pampa, Texas, where 50 percent of the students are Hispanic, "The word 'Trump' is enough to derail a class," reported a middle school teacher. Especially in middle school, where behavior is notoriously hard to manage, discourse spirals quickly into anger. We heard multiple accounts of students yelling at each other, and "increased hostility in conversations between students." A New York City middle teacher put it succinctly: "Students on both sides are angry."

Angry words can escalate quickly. "My fifth-graders got in a fist fight on the playground yesterday," a Queens, New York, teacher wrote. "It started when one of the boys quoted Donald Trump."

Clearly, educators want to prevent those kinds of fights while encouraging a lively exchange of ideas in healthy debate. One of the goals of education is to teach students how to make persuasive arguments, support opinions with facts and listen to the perspectives of others. Those goals are out the window in many classrooms. A Biddeford, Maine, middle school teacher observed that, "Students are quick to become accusatory and condemn others for having a different point of view."

Another middle school teacher in Indiana wrote, "Students are more apt to get into shouting matches than to have a discussion about something."

For some students, this level of conflict is hard to handle. "A student said he'd prefer another Obama

term, and it angered another student who has been vocal about her support of Donald Trump," a Texas high school teacher said. "The angry student began yelling, 'What is the matter with you?' and 'This is why I HATE people.'"

While the increased tension sends some students into tears, other, often older students, are more likely to find the campaign a springboard to adolescent humor. The comments indicated that students in middle and high school, especially boys, seem to have a hard time distinguishing between entertainment and politics. Not only do they see the campaign, the candidates and the debates as a joke, but they're missing the fact that something significant is happening.

"My students seem more interested in the campaign this year, but only in the same way they are interested in circling a couple of kids who are about to fight on the playground," wrote a sixth-grade teacher from Roseville, California. "It is pure entertainment." A Boston high school teacher laments, "Our students see the whole presidential campaign as a game, with the real common people having no real input."

Sometimes a joke just isn't funny, and students are learning that the hard way. A Chicago elementary school teacher reported, "Some of the first-graders were talking about who their parents voted for. One jumped in, apparently as a joke (because the students are old enough to know that Donald Trump is an easy butt of a joke), and said 'What about Donald Trump?'" His friends, not realizing he was joking, proceeded to yell at him until he cried."

A consistent theme from teachers across grade levels was that their students understood the behavior on display isn't okay. Middle school students on New York's Long Island "are confused as to how certain campaigns have been allowed to promote racism, violence and hate." And high school students in Lake Worth, Florida, display "lots of negativity about the candidates and the way they speak" and "discuss the immaturity of some of the rhetoric presented by adults."

Or, as a middle school administrator from Omak, Washington, commented, "Students do not understand why this has become such an angry and dishonorable campaign. They are taught better behavior by their teachers, and then they see this mess on TV and are confused." ▶

## *Impact on Teaching*

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM and common sense dictate that teachers keep their partisan politics out of the classroom. This year, though, educators are finding it tough to remain nonpartisan when all the talk about civility—something they need to uphold in schools—is primarily commentary on a single candidate. In general, they’ve chosen one of three ways forward. Some, mainly experienced social studies teachers, are doing what they’ve always done. Others are making significant changes, opting either to abandon neutrality or focus on something specific to this year’s campaign, like the use of rhetoric. And others, including 50 percent of elementary school teachers who responded to the survey, are simply avoiding it altogether.

The biggest curriculum challenge is figuring what, whether or how to teach about the election. In most presidential election years, students from kindergarten to high school get some exposure to the process and the candidates. Elementary teachers festoon classrooms with red, white and blue, conduct mock elections, and use the campaign to reinforce lessons on geography, the presidency and the importance of voting. In middle and high school, social studies teachers take a deeper dive into both the process and the issues; they may stage mock debates and voting registration drives for graduating seniors.

But it’s different this year.

Teachers who normally don’t teach civics are getting involved. In San Diego, a high school teacher explained, “I am not a history teacher, but the issues of this election are spilling over into everything.” And in Arlington, Texas, another high school teacher worried about her students who have told her they “feel alienated from a particular math teacher who advocates for Trump.”

Teachers whose lessons would usually involve the election are struggling to make plans this year. Some are resolutely plowing ahead, focusing discussion on

issues, insisting students support their claims with evidence from credible sources. Among the stalwarts who responded to the survey, a few were downright enthusiastic, like the middle school teacher from New Mexico who wrote, “The students are more vocal about this election and it’s a great opportunity to educate them on the facts versus gossip about all presidential campaigns. It’s also a great opportunity to teach them about media bias.”

But even educators committed to teaching in a way that would allow students to draw valid conclusions are struggling to find factual age-appropriate information. Over and over, when telling what they need, teachers listed *factual* candidate profiles, *facts* about the issues and *fact-based* explanations of the policy differences. More than one respondent reported launching a vast exercise on media literacy and fact checking, turning to sites like PolitiFact (home of the Truth-O-Meter) and procon.com.

### **“AVOIDING IT”**

Many educators, worried about maintaining both objectivity and order, are tiptoeing around the campaign. In response to the statement “I am hesitant to teach about the 2016 presidential election,” 43 percent of K-12 educators answered “yes.” That percentage shifts depending on the age of the students taught; while only 37 percent of high school teachers indicated hesitation, half the respondents who teach in elementary schools indicated they were thinking twice.

Some teachers are simply avoiding the campaign altogether. “I’m staying completely away from teaching about this election,” said an Anchorage, Alaska, elementary teacher. From a teacher in Maryland: “I have just stopped.” In Hawaii: “I try not to talk about it.” In California: “I refuse to teach it.”

Avoiding the issue doesn’t sit well with many teachers. A New York middle school administrator who saw

his staff “tiptoeing,” explained, “It is so inflammatory that no one wants to even discuss it. Not good when we should be talking about issues.” In San Antonio, one teacher knew her young students were missing out. “Last election was amazing in my class!” she wrote. “We even learned about electoral votes using other first-grade classrooms. Not this year!! Not touching it!!! Not sure what’s worse, the candidates or what they stand for!!”

The avoidance often arises from a desire to maintain civility and keep kids safe and calm. In Arlington, Virginia, a teacher explained, “I try to not bring it up since it is so stressful for my students.” Even in high school, “I try to be more careful—rather than stoke the fires,” wrote one Utah teacher. In Kansas, a high school teacher sounded apologetic as she explained, “I bring it up twice a month out of obligation.”

The possibility of parental complaints or crossing a principal’s directive has had a distinctly chilling effect on teachers’ willingness to bring the election into class. “My principal does not want us discussing politics with the kids,” one Virginia teacher said. To the west in Colorado, an elementary teacher told us students in her school were arguing so much that “We have been asked by our principal to encourage students to save political discussions for home with their parents and with peers outside of school.” Other educators described themselves as politically out of step with the community and parents. One, from a New England state, pointed to the bottom line: “I need my job so I must walk this fine line.”

### “TEACHING FOR OUR LIVES”

For many educators, the question is not *if* the election—and the issues it raises—needs to be part of their curriculum; the question is *how*. “The usual course of an election does not apply here,” wrote a Pasadena, California, high school teacher. “It’s been difficult for me because this is an unprecedented situation.”

Faced with the choice between maintaining neutrality and denouncing rhetoric that’s counter to their values, many respondents indicated they would abandon neutrality.

When the classroom is filled with brown faces, teachers told us, they felt a moral imperative to speak out. “I am less neutral,” a Jersey City, New Jersey,

high school teacher volunteered. “I want to reassure my students I don’t buy into racist rhetoric.” Others echoed the need to stand as allies to their students.

Educators indicated they are focusing on staying true to the ideals and values of their schools. A Blue Hill, Maine, elementary teacher explained, “I am more vocal. I make connections between how we are expected to treat each other at school and how the candidates treat each other and segments of the population.” A Michigan teacher added, “Normally I don’t tell students about my political opinions. This year I feel it is appropriate to say that I wouldn’t vote for someone who isn’t going to be respectful of others.”

A Renton, Washington, high school teacher said,



Schools are, by design, institutions that strive to teach citizenship. But the lessons in many classrooms look different this year.

“For the first time in my career, I state bluntly what is appropriate conduct for a candidate for this country’s highest office.” She spelled it out for students: “If it can get you suspended from high school, you shouldn’t be espousing it as a candidate.” Another Washington teacher wrote, “This is probably the first time I haven’t been unbiased about it. My students need to know that some of what they are witnessing is not okay.”

In schools where student partisanship leans heavily to one side, educators find themselves needing to speak up for students whose political values are in the minority. “The rhetoric has set up a school community that is hostile to conservatives and the Republican Party,” a Michigan high school teacher said. “It makes it difficult if not impossible to not take sides in my classroom because I can’t be silent in the face of this kind of rhetoric, lest I lose my students’ respect or trust.”

No one can fault an educator who stands up for

values like respect, dignity and honesty—values that have long been central to character education and anti-bullying programs. But this year has pushed some educators to go further and take risks. “I have thrown caution into the wind and have spoken out against certain candidates which I have NEVER done,” wrote a Michigan high school teacher, “but I feel it’s my duty to speak out against ignorance!”

These are high-stakes decisions. Several wrote about parents registering complaints when they raised issues of values, fact-checking and critical thinking. But, as one Indianapolis high school teacher put it, “I am a point where I’m going to take a stand even if it costs me my position.”

In Washington state, one high school teacher admitted, “I am teaching off the hook before anyone ‘catches’ me and puts me in a Common Core box; we are reading Howard Zinn, Anne Frank, Haig Bosmajian, Jane Yolen, Ayn Rand, George Orwell and survivors’ testimonies from the Holocaust and the genocides around the world. ... I am making it as real and as connected to my students as I can. I feel like I am teaching for our lives.”

#### **HIGH STAKES FOR ALL OF US**

Every presidential election is important, of course. What may be most important about this election is something few pundits have talked about: its impact on the next generation of voters.

What’s at stake in 2016 is not simply who will be our 45th president or how the parties might realign, but how well we are preparing young people for their most important job: the job of being a citizen. If schools avoid the election—or fail to find ways to help students discuss it productively—it’s akin to taking civics out of the curriculum.

Public schools were established in the 19th century mainly to serve a civic mission and ensure that our system of self-government would survive. That mission continues today. Preparing students for citizenship continues to be one of the three broad goals that all sides have agreed must be the purpose of schools: *college, career and citizenship*.

Since the 1970s, voter participation rates have steadily declined, to the point that only 57.5 percent of eligible voters turned out for the 2012 presidential election. Will this election inspire more students to become voters when they turn 18, or will it add to the burden of voter apathy?

The good news is—according to the survey respondents—young people are taking an interest in politics, more than they have in years. That message came in

from across the country. In Oakland, California, middle school students “go home to watch the news with their families on their own. They ask for permission to research and blog about political candidates and speeches every day.” In Massachusetts, a high school teacher says it’s the “one positive” impact of the election on her students. “They WANT to know how primaries and conventions look, what limitations on a president’s power exist, and what other elections have been so outrageous,” she wrote. Middle schoolers in Tampa, Florida, “are completely immersed,” says their teacher. “They engage in intense debate about it in and out of the classroom.” And, in Pleasanton, California, another middle school teacher reports, “For the first time in my 20 years of teaching I have a group of students who have formed a Politics Club.”

But what about the schools that aren’t even teaching the election this year, or where students feel disillusioned or disconnected? The survey gave ample evidence that—even if students are more interested in this year’s campaign—this election cycle may also be diminishing their faith in electoral politics. “The sad part is that students are losing respect for the political process and for the office of the [p]resident,” said a high school teacher from East Hartford, Connecticut. “They see the candidates as jokes and are offended and dismayed for the future.”

A New York high school teacher summed up the dilemma. “They are increasingly political (which is good),” she wrote, “but the extreme rhetoric being modeled is not helping their ability to utilize reason and evidence, rather than replying in kind.”

Learning to participate in government, even simply as an informed voter, cannot be achieved by interest alone. Preparation for the job of citizen means developing a civic disposition, like being willing to listen to multiple points of view, debate issues, support claims and work with others. Citizens must understand fundamental principles like the role of free speech and of a free press; the fact that majority rule can never undercut minority rights; and the rule of law. What makes presidential elections so compelling—most of the time—is that they’re live, real-time case studies in civic life. While no election or candidate is a paradigm of civic virtue, and there have been some disgraceful election campaigns in our past, this one stands out for modeling the worst kind of behavior.

“One of the things that worries me is that this is the first presidential campaign my high school students are old enough to understand,” an Edmonds, Washington, teacher said. “I hope they don’t walk away thinking this is what politics is all about.” ▶



## ABOUT THE SURVEY

The discussion in this report summarizes responses to questions posed by Teaching Tolerance via an informal online survey conducted from March 23 to April 2, 2016.

A link to the survey was sent to educators who subscribe to the Teaching Tolerance newsletter and was also shared on Teaching Tolerance's social media sites. It was open to any educator who wanted to participate. Several other groups, including Facing History and Ourselves and Teaching for Change, also shared the survey link with their social media audiences.

### RESPONDENTS WERE ASKED IF THEY AGREED OR DISAGREED WITH EACH OF THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS:

- There has been an increase in anti-immigrant sentiment at my school since the 2016 presidential campaign began.
- There has been an increase in anti-Muslim sentiment at my school since the 2016 presidential campaign began.
- I have heard an increase in uncivil political discourse at my school since the 2016 presidential campaign began.
- My students have expressed concern about what might happen to them or their families after the election.

### RESPONDENTS WERE ALSO ABLE TO PROVIDE FREE RESPONSES TO THESE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS:

- How have you seen the rhetoric of this year's presidential campaign affect your students? Your school?
- If you have witnessed bullying or biased language at your school—from adults or students—that mimics the rhetoric of the campaign, please tell us about it.
- Have you changed the way you approach teaching about the election this year? If so, how?
- What resources do you need to help you teach safely and effectively about the 2016 election?
- Do you have additional comments?

In the course of just over a week, almost 2,000 people responded to the survey. Collectively, they submitted over 5,000 comments. Nearly all respondents identified themselves by name, email address, grade level and state. The comments, with the identifying information removed, are available online at [splcenter.org/trump-effect](http://splcenter.org/trump-effect).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was written by Maureen B. Costello and edited by Booth Gunter, Richard Cohen and Adrienne van der Valk. Michael Warner provided data analysis support. Russell Estes designed the layout.

### SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER

CO-FOUNDERS Morris Dees, Joseph J. Levin Jr.

PRESIDENT & CEO J. Richard Cohen

INTELLIGENCE PROJECT DIRECTOR Heidi Beirich

OUTREACH DIRECTOR Lecia Brooks

LEGAL DIRECTOR Rhonda Brownstein

CHIEF COMMUNICATIONS & DEVELOPMENT OFFICER Wendy Via

### TEACHING TOLERANCE

DIRECTOR Maureen B. Costello

SENIOR MANAGER, TEACHING AND LEARNING Sara Wicht

MANAGING EDITOR Adrienne van der Valk

TEACHING AND LEARNING SPECIALISTS Jarah Botello, June Cara Christian

WRITER/ASSOCIATE EDITORS Monita K. Bell, Maya Lindberg

RESEARCH ASSOCIATE Margaret Sasser

TECHNICAL LEAD D. Scott McDaniel

NEW MEDIA ASSOCIATE Joanna Williams

PROGRAM COORDINATOR Steffany Moyer

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT Cecile Jones

### DESIGN

DESIGN DIRECTOR Russell Estes

SENIOR DESIGNER Valerie Downes

DESIGNERS Michelle Leland, Sunny Paulk, Scott Phillips, Kristina Turner

DESIGN ASSOCIATE Shannon Anderson

### PHOTO CREDITS

Cover photo: AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster; Page 4: EPA/RICHARD ELLIS/Corbis (Man with Sign), © Media Bakery (Classroom); Page 6: AP Images/J Pat Carter; Page 7: AP Images/Tony Gutierrez; Page 8: AP Images/Jonathan Miano; Page 9: Timothy Tai/Corbis (Sanders), AP Images/Rainier Ehrhardt (Cruz), Porter Gifford/Corbis (Clinton); Page 13: Getty Images



