

Day After Election Guide

A Resource for K-12 Educators
and Administrators



VIRGINIA CENTER FOR
INCLUSIVE
COMMUNITIES



Content

day after

Why a guide?

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Additional content and links will be added throughout Fall 2020 at www.inclusiveVA.org/day-after-election-guide



In 2016, the [Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities](http://www.inclusiveVA.org) was overwhelmed with urgent requests from schools after incidents of bias, bullying, and discrimination. A significant number of these incidents were connected to the 2016 Presidential election cycle: students repeating statements they had heard from politicians, educators and parents not knowing how to respond to major events in the news, and a pressing concern about the decline of civility in public discourse. An important lesson from four years ago was the importance of intentional, proactive planning.

The key message is that a school’s plan for the day after the election should actually be their plan for the entire school year.

This Day After Election Guide is designed to support educators and administrators in preparing for the 2020 Presidential election. The key message is that a school’s plan for the day after the election should actually be their plan for the entire school year. That means that classroom lessons, educator professional development, and communication with parents and guardians throughout the 2020-2021 school year should clearly establish and reinforce expectations about how to show respect for one another and how to explore controversial or difficult subjects.

All schools should be places of belonging for every student. When students feel like they fully belong, they are more likely to raise their hands, do their homework, care about the quality of their work, look out for others, and perform at their best. Schools that foster inclusion and belonging therefore become more successful. Especially at moments that can feel divisive like an election season, schools have an important responsibility to foster a sense of belonging.

As one school administrator shared with the educators at his school, “I hope that you will be politically ambiguous but morally crystal clear.” In other words, while educators have a responsibility to not be partisan, they similarly have an obligation to communicate their classroom and school values on an ongoing basis. Doing so early on can help to prevent incidents of bias, bullying, and discrimination. And, if those do occur, relying on a strong foundation can help a classroom and school learn, heal, and move forward together.





Classroom Climate



Students who report feeling safe, respected and included in their classrooms are more likely to succeed academically than students who do not perceive their classroom to be a positive learning environment.

Building a positive classroom climate is especially important in a Presidential election year because it can provide students with the tools and skills to successfully interact with teachers and classmates who differ from them – politically or otherwise. The work of building classroom climate should begin the very first day of school and focus on building empathy, establishing classroom norms, fostering positive peer interactions and relationships, and providing spaces in which students can learn to communicate effectively and respectfully with classroom peers. Below are evidence-based strategies teachers can employ to establish a positive classroom climate during the election.

ESTABLISH CLASSROOM NORMS

Engage students in the process of creating a class contract that specifies what behaviors are appropriate and expected leading up to, and following, the election. For example, “Listen to others’ opinions.” Ensure that all students agree to follow the established norms. Make the contract visible in the classroom so that it can be easily referenced. If students help create the contract, they are more likely to follow it.



“Without trust, a teacher cannot connect with students. I spend time each class period during the beginning of the school year getting to know my students and letting them get to know me. I work to ensure that class is a safe space through a variety of activities. One of my students’ favorite activities is establishing the norms for class. I then print the norms in poster-size and post them in the room. I make sure that they know we are all expected to adhere to them - myself included.”

– High School Teacher

BUILD EMPATHY

Play an empathy game in which you create scenarios that could happen. You might even describe scenarios that really happened during the 2016 presidential election. For example, “Kids tell a student she can’t play with them because her parents are supporting the ‘wrong’ candidate” or “A student was crying after the election because he thought the President would send him back to the country where he was born.” Then discuss or have students act out how the individuals in the scenarios might feel. Alternatively, discuss the phrase “walking in someone else’s shoes.” Have students think and write about how they would feel in the scenarios.



FOSTER POSITIVE PEER INTERACTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Intentionally create collaborative groups that include students from diverse backgrounds. Assign group work that promotes cooperation (not competition), positive interaction, and working towards a common goal. Teach students how to support one another in collaborative groups and otherwise. For example, challenge your students to think about how they could be an effective ally. Possible responses include speaking up in the moment, getting help from a trusted adult, or talking with classmates privately.

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- In grades 3-5, student can explore the power of speaking up and the strength of acting together through [the story of César Chávez](#)
- For grades 6-12, students can set up their own dialogues about [the 2020 election](#)

TEACH AND PROVIDE A SAFE SPACE FOR RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION

Make “Morning Meeting” a daily practice. Start each day with a meeting that provides a safe and inclusive space for students to respectfully share their feelings. Work with students to establish expectations for communicating, role play appropriate sharing and active listening, and provide students with constructive feedback. As you get closer to the election, your class will have a designated time and space to discuss their emotions. Consider prompts such as: “Name one emotion word that describes how you are feeling about the election and one reason why you are feeling that way.” or “For people who are sad or disappointed about the election, what is one thing you could do to support them?”

“I do a trait of the month. We read a book about the trait, and I display quotes that are about the trait. We have class discussions about it. I am intentional when selecting read-alouds and use the books to discuss and reflect upon character traits of not only the characters in the books but also of the students in the class.”

– Elementary School Teacher

GO DEEPER

Teaching Tolerance’s [“Let’s Talk”](#) guide is a helpful guide for educators who have already established safe spaces in their classroom.





Curriculum



With the election already on students' minds, offering structured opportunities to discuss their beliefs and opinions allows students to develop media literacy skills and practice civic dialogue. These conversations should be guided by discussion and deliberative dialogue rather than debate. These approaches allow for more critical engagement and analysis in keeping with the classroom climate and norms you have established.

One tool that educators can use when discussing current events and controversial issues is a KWL Chart. By having students reflect on and then engage what they know, what they want to know, and what they have learned, educators can provide structure and direction for focused learning. Whenever engaging students in such discussions, educators should emphasize up front that hatred or targeting of a group based on identity (gender, nationality, race, religion, sexual orientation, etc.) is not an acceptable political position to bring up in the classroom.

“Having a calm demeanor and a structured way to moderate a discussion increases the chances of students coming away with a better understanding of each other. I let them know that we are all imperfect beings (myself included) who will make mistakes regardless of our best intentions. When we do make mistakes, though, we need to accept responsibility for them, learn from them, and then do better in the future. (I find that my willingness to openly discuss my mistakes and faults sets a positive example.)”

– Elementary School Teacher

There are many ways to incorporate thoughtful lessons related to the Presidential election into curriculum.

English

Read texts about past elections or that help to model empathy when characters disagree

History & Social Science

Learn about significant elections throughout United States history or about diverse political systems throughout the world

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- [PBS has created “Seven Engaging Civics Lesson Plans”](#)

Mathematics

Analyze statistical polls or election results from past Presidential elections

Science

Consider how scientifically based techniques are used for polling and voting machines

GO DEEPER:

- [The American Association for the Advancement of Science offers several lessons to explore “Science and Politics in an Election Year”](#)

World Language

Research elections throughout the world and the similarities and differences with the political system in the United States



GO DEEPER

Resources for educators to engage students in dialogue:

- [9 Ways To Teach about the Election: A Social Justice Approach](#) (from ADL)
- [Debate, Discussion, Deliberative Dialogue](#) (from National Issues Forums)
- [Fostering Civil Discourse: A Guide for Classroom Conversations](#) (from Facing History and Ourselves)



Professional Development

From the very beginning of the school year, educators should be reminded of school expectations related to the 2020 Presidential election. **It is important that there is consistency within a school so that students are not having markedly different experiences in different classrooms when it comes to engaging the issues associated with the election.**

After providing clear guidelines, administrators should dedicate specific time during professional development sessions to share scenarios that could come up and invite educators to share possible responses. **These could be proactive (such as asking how educators could adapt lessons based on the election) and reactive (encouraging educators to consider how they would respond to comments a student might make).** This opportunity to brainstorm will ensure clear and consistent understanding of school expectations, while also giving educators the opportunity to gain comfort in handling specific situations.

As the 2020 Presidential Election approaches, administrators should continue to reinforce expectations at faculty meetings, while also allowing educators to ask questions. They should also have a plan to provide space for educators to process how they are feeling, particularly in the days immediately following the election.

“I HELPED IMPLEMENT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING DAYS CENTERED AROUND INCLUSIVITY, RESTORATIVE PRACTICES, AND SELF-REFLECTION TO INCLUDE LESSONS ON BIAS (IMPLICIT VS. EXPLICIT), MICROAGGRESSION, SCHOOL DATA EVALUATION ACTIVITIES, SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING, AND SAFE SPACES FOR CHALLENGING DIALOGUE. NO MATTER MY POSITION, I HAVE LEARNED THE EFFECTIVENESS OF USING HONEY, INSTEAD OF VINEGAR WITH THE ‘OUCH, THEN EDUCATE’ NORM. THERE IS A KIND WAY TO COMMUNICATE OFFENSE.”

- SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR



... Responding to Challenges

Even with the best planning, there are times when unexpected challenges can emerge.

In the 2020 election cycle, these challenges could include:

- A student complains that her first amendment rights are being infringed because she was told to remove a political sticker from her personal laptop.
- A parent complains that the school is promoting a political agenda by having a program that supports immigrant students.
- While a student is learning from home, a parent can be overheard in the background making partisan statements.
- A student is told that it is not appropriate to make a particular statement in class and responds by saying, “but [CANDIDATE’S NAME] says it!”



“While overt acts of bias aren’t readily on display typically, small examples of bias or prejudice do sometimes occur. For my students, I find that speaking with each student individually is a good first step, followed by some Restorative Justice techniques. In those individual circumstances, I try to help guide the student into thinking about times in which bias may have been directed against [them]. This often is a necessary first step for them realizing how their display of bias or prejudice may have impacted someone else.”

– Elementary School Teacher



Here are some general considerations for how to respond in those moments:

- **Rely on your existing classroom practices and norms.** Have an extra morning meeting. Refer to a recent text or lesson related to empathy.
- **Do not ignore discriminatory behavior or words.** Your silence suggests that you tacitly approve.
- **Ask simple, exploratory questions without aggression.** Doing so can open up communication and clarify the root of the student’s beliefs so that you know what information you need to convey. Asking for more information also lets the student encounter their own bias.
- **Age appropriate responses:**
 - For younger grades, discuss why some words hurt. This might be a time to explain what bias and prejudice are. Don’t oversimplify your language. Prejudice and bias are not just “not nice.”
 - As students get older, you can begin to explore the historical context, tying it into social studies lessons. “Do you know the history of that word?”
- **Be prepared to act.** Avoid being tongue-tied after a student or colleague says something biased by practicing your strategies for responding. Promise yourself that you will speak up.

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The Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities has developed [Considerations After Incidents of Bias](#) for administrators and educators.





Legal Considerations

When engaging in lessons and activities related to politics, public schools must follow particular legal guidelines. In particular, the 1969 Supreme Court decision in *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* affirmed that “In the absence of a specific showing of constitutionally valid reasons to regulate their speech, students are entitled to freedom of expression of their views.” There are limitations to free speech in schools when it will cause classroom disruptions. However, what is considered disruptive is not explicitly named and can vary by context.

Overall, it is important to be consistent. Public schools cannot censor one perspective in a student newspaper or only allow one candidate or party to rent space while prohibiting others from such opportunities. Being clear about what is and is not allowed within your school context and communicating that proactively to all stakeholders (educators, students, parents/guardians, community partners, etc.) is important.

Educators are encouraged to address issues of free speech within the curriculum when possible and appropriate. By doing so, students will have the opportunity to explore diverse viewpoints and increase their civic engagement within a structured context. Again, educators should provide balance and not show favoritism. They should also take great care to prevent comments or actions that target people based on identity (gender, national origin, race, religion, sexual orientation, etc.).

Independent schools are generally not governed by these restrictions. **However, both public and independent schools are strongly encouraged to proactively secure responses from legal counsel to the questions in this section.**

- Are students allowed to wear items with political messages (candidate names, slogans, etc.)?

- Are students allowed to have political messages on their personal items (notebooks, laptops, cars, etc.)? What about backgrounds if students are learning from home?

- Are educators allowed to wear or display items with political messages (candidate names, slogans, etc.)?

- Are educators allowed to have political messages on their personal items (notebooks, laptops, cars, etc.)?

- Can student clubs or organizations promote specific candidates or political parties through posters or events?

- Can students share their political viewpoints (including endorsing a candidate) in a school newspaper?

- Can schools allow political candidates or elected officials to speak to students? At an assembly? In a class? For a club?

- What if a political campaign or party wants to rent space at a school outside of school hours?

- How should an educator respond if a student speaks for or against a candidate or political party during class? During a club/activity? On a school bus?

- How can educators teach about the election without being partisan or showing preference?

- Are educators allowed to put up messages with specific viewpoints in their classrooms or offices if they are not overtly affiliated with a political party or candidate? What about personal vehicles?



GO DEEPER

ACLU’s “[Know Your Rights: Students’ Rights](#)” explores freedom of speech and expression in schools



Communication

Administrators should consider three opportunities during the 2020-2021 school year to send messages to parents and guardians about the school's expectations and plans related to the Presidential election:

1. At the beginning of the school year to be clear about overall school norms and expectations
2. One or two weeks prior to the Presidential election to reinforce the opening message
3. Immediately following the Presidential election to communicate how the school is moving forward

All three messages should encourage the entire school community to partner in embracing core values connected to respect, dialogue, empathy, and cooperation. They should highlight any events or initiatives that the school is undertaking, and they should encourage families to have respectful dialogues that complement the school's approach.



election

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This guide has been created by the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities



ACHIEVING SUCCESS THROUGH INCLUSION

The Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities works with schools, businesses, and communities to achieve success by addressing prejudices, in all forms, in order to improve academic achievement, increase workplace productivity, and enhance local trust. Through workshops, retreats, and customized programs that raise knowledge, motivation, and skills, VCIC develops leaders who work together to achieve success throughout the Commonwealth.

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Virginia Humanities is the state humanities council. We aim to share the stories of all Virginians—or, better yet, find ways for people to share their own stories. We want to connect Virginians with their history and culture and, in doing that, help us all get to know each other a little better.

We are headquartered in Charlottesville at the University of Virginia but our work covers the Commonwealth.

Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities

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