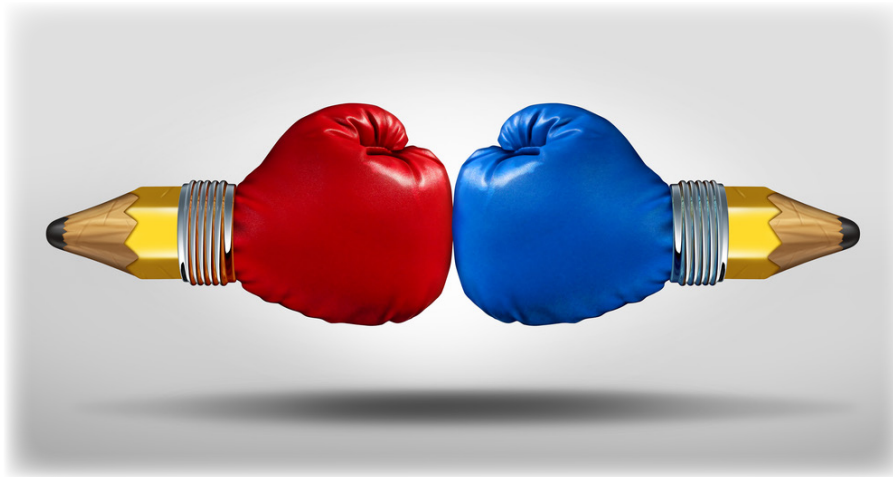




FIVE CHARTS THAT SHOW HOW PARTISAN STRIFE IS IMPACTING PUBLIC SCHOOLS



Preparing students to participate in civil and respectful ways in our diverse democracy has long been a core mission of public schools. A new [study](#) led by NEPC Fellow [John Rogers](#) of UCLA and [Joseph Kahne](#) of the University of California, Riverside finds that U.S. high schools are struggling to fulfill this mission as they increasingly encounter hyper-partisan efforts. Those efforts have sought to spread misinformation, to encourage the harassment of LGBTQ+ students, and to limit opportunities for productively discussing controversial topics. Such challenges are particularly pervasive in politically diverse areas where one party does not dominate.

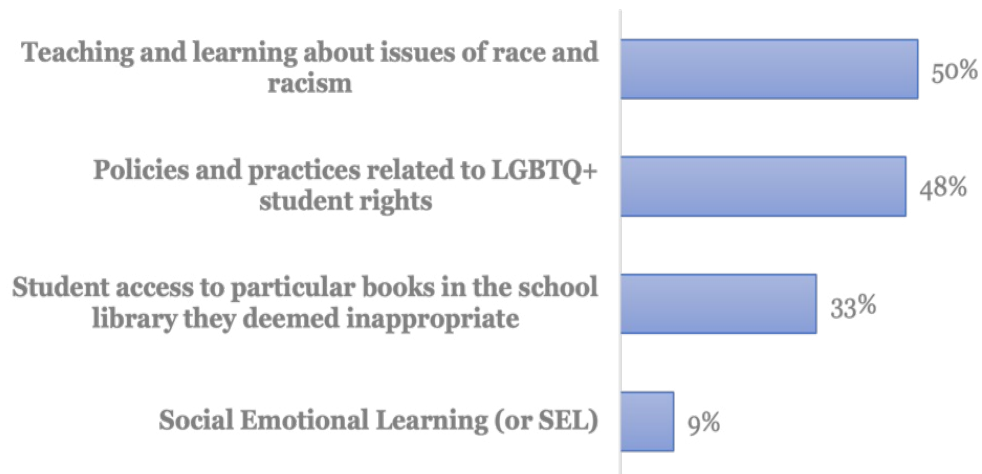
Released in November, the study is based on a nationally representative survey of 682 public high school principals (conducted during the summer of 2022) plus 32 follow-up interviews. The researchers identified the Congressional districts in which respondents' schools were located as predominantly Democratic (blue), predominantly Republican (red) or purple (a mixture). They then contrasted these most recent results with those of a similar survey conducted in 2018. The five charts below highlight key findings.

1. Public schools increasingly are targets of political conflict

Nearly half of principals (45 percent) reported that the amount of conflict in their community was higher during the 2021-22 school year than it was pre-pandemic. Just three percent said it was lower. Teaching about race and racism was the area where principals were most likely to report challenges from community members, followed closely by LGBTQ+ content. These challenges were most prevalent among principals working in purple Congressional districts. Said a principal in a purple area of Georgia:

“It seems like everyone right now is angry with the government. Schools and teachers in particular are the closest government agent that anyone will deal with, so that is the first opportunity for someone to vent their frustration.”

Principals reporting parents or other community members sought to limit or challenge:

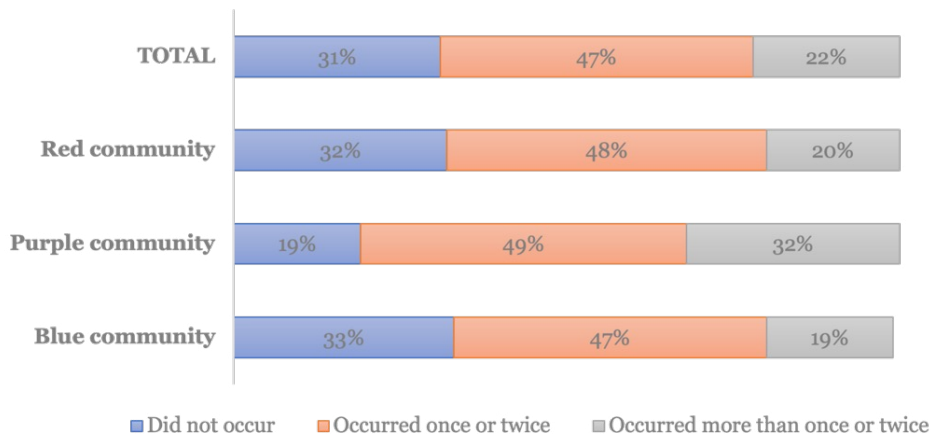


2. Political conflict undermines the practice of respectful dialogue

A majority of high school principals report that students have made demeaning or hateful remarks toward classmates for expressing either liberal or conservative views, and that strong differences of political opinion among students have created more contentious classroom environments. Although most principals indicated they took action to draw attention to the importance of ensuring that students with differing political perspectives are heard and treated with respect, professional development (PD) isn't keeping pace. In fact, the number of principals reporting that teachers had received PD in how to conduct discussions of controversial issues has declined since 2018 in all but blue communities. Declines were biggest in purple communities. Said a principal in a purple area of California:

In my heart, I would love for my history teachers to talk about politics, elections, and current events, but unfortunately my parents cannot handle it, so I indicated that it's not appropriate for them to teach these subjects in class. This is not me or my admin team being afraid of conflict. We are taking a pragmatic approach so that our school can function with as little disruption as possible and hopefully without violence.

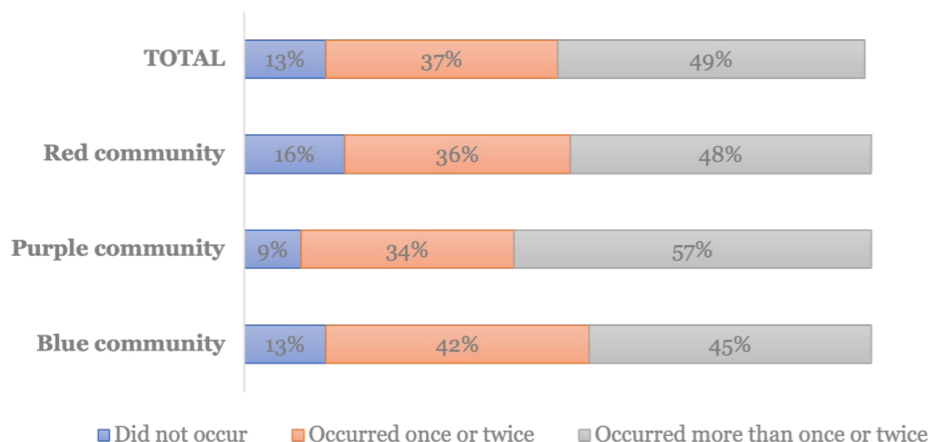
Principals reporting students have made demeaning or hateful remarks toward classmates for expressing either liberal or conservative views, by partisan context.



3. Conflict makes it harder to address misinformation

Misinformation—much of it tied to partisan organizations and causes—makes it more challenging to encourage productive and civil dialogue. After all, it is difficult to develop a shared sense of how to move forward when different people are working from different sets of “facts.” Nearly two thirds of principals (64 percent) say parents or community members have challenged information used by teachers at their schools. The share of principals saying parents or community members challenged teachers’ use of information three or more times nearly doubled between 2018 and 2022, from 12 percent to 22 percent. The increase was most marked in purple communities, where the share nearly tripled, from 12 percent to 35 percent. Most principals also said that students themselves have made unfounded claims based on unreliable media sources. “There is so much information at everyone’s fingertips, that it has made it hard for parents and students to decide what is real and what is fake,” said a principal in a purple community in Michigan.

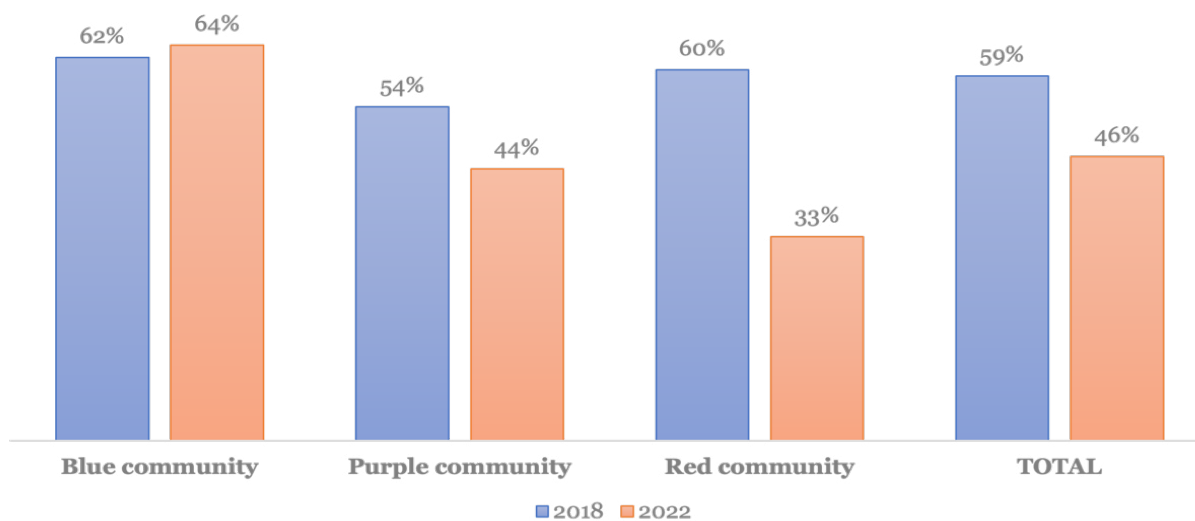
Principals reporting students have made unfounded claims in class based on unreliable media sources, by partisan context.



4. Conflict leads to declines in support for teaching about race, racism, and racial and ethnic diversity

High schools increasingly struggle to teach students about the full spectrum of American experiences and histories, especially when it comes to issues related to racism and race. In purple communities in particular, nearly one in four principals (23 percent) said school board members or district leaders had taken actions to limit teaching about these topics. In the meantime, the share of principals saying they had provided PD on racism/race fell from 59 percent in 2018 to 46 percent this year, with steeper declines in red communities. “My superintendent told me in no uncertain terms that I could not address issues of race and bias etc. with students or staff this year,” said a principal in a red community in Minnesota. “We could not address the deeper learning. He told me, ‘This is not the time or the place to do this here. You have to remember you are in the heart of Trump country and you’re just going to start a big mess if you start talking about that stuff.’”

Principals reporting that their school or district provided professional development in ways for students to learn about the literature and history of people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds, by partisan context in 2018 and 2022.



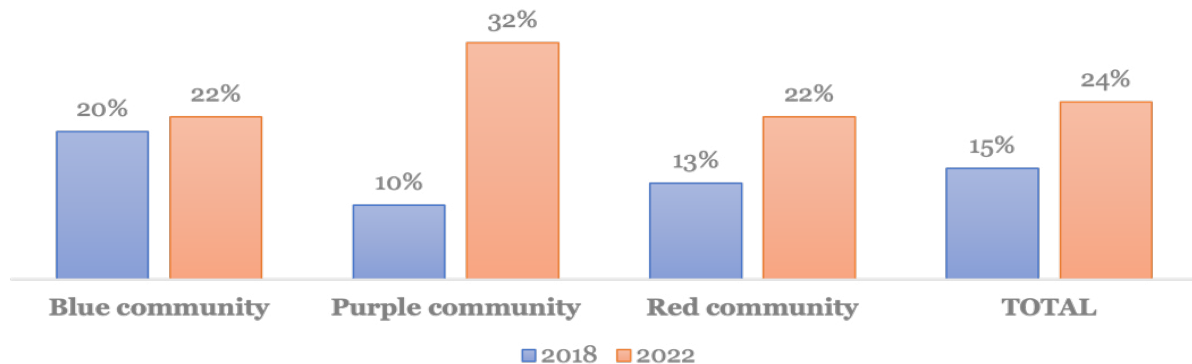
5. Principals report sizable growth in harassment of LGBTQ+ youth

The survey results also suggest that schools are increasingly facing challenges related to teaching students to treat one another with dignity and respect, especially when those students are LGBTQ+ youth, and especially in purple communities. Fewer than half of principals said school board members or district leaders made statements or acted to promote policies and practices that protected LGBTQ+ student rights. “We had our first transgender students coming out publicly this year and we needed a transgender nondiscrimination policy,” a principal in a purple community in California said.

People on my admin team told me not to put the policy on our board agen-

da because it would be another divisive topic during a particularly difficult year, but I knew it was something we had to have and moved forward. Many parents spoke angrily at the board meetings and parent meetings, stating ‘it is immoral’ and ‘students should not be allowed to use the bathroom’ based on the sex that they identify with. Some families disenrolled their children to homeschool them. My board declined to pass the policy for six months. Our wonderful school counselors also took abuse from parents — one counselor described to me how a parent screamed at her on the phone and called her a ‘homo lover.’ It’s quite disheartening to work so hard and care for all our students when so many people are being hateful and threatening.

Principals reporting students at their school have made hostile and demeaning remarks about LGBTQ+ students multiple times, by partisan context in 2018 and 2022.



The report concludes with the words of a Massachusetts principal worried about the implications of the ways in which partisan conflict has invaded K-12 education:

The past two years have been the hardest years of my career and they have left me worried about the future of public education. They have also left me wondering about my future as a public school administrator. The intensity of the pressure from the community has been overwhelming at times. The anxiety of parents has been greater than I’ve ever seen. The emboldened criticism of the school, the district, and me personally has been almost non-stop. The national conservative pressure is coordinated here locally and borders on harassment and bullying. Parents who are not necessarily conservative have exerted huge pressure on the schools because they want certainty in the present and the future for their children, and we cannot always provide it. This is an existential moment for the cause of public schools in this country.

NEPC Resources on Politics

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