

'Classrooms Are Political'

Larry Ferlazzo

16-20 minutes

(This is the first post in a four-part series.)

The new question-of-the-week is:

What are the best ways to respond when teachers are told we should keep politics out of the classroom?

It's not uncommon for teachers to be told they should "keep politics out of the classroom."

That comment is particularly ironic today when political failures have been the primary reason many of us can't even **be** in a classroom because of COVID-19 mismanagement.

This five-part series will explore potential responses to this admonition.

Today, Dr. Angela M. Ward, Holly Spinelli, Rocio del Castillo, Ed.D., and Keisha Rembert share their responses. Angela, Holly, Rocio, and Keisha also were guests on my [10-minute BAM! Radio Show](#). You can also find a list of, and links to, [previous shows here](#).

"Life is political"

Dr. Angela M. Ward is a public school administrator with 23 years of experience. She is focused on creating identity-safe schools and workplaces and strives daily to nurture equity-centered schooling. Follow Dr. Ward @2WardEquity on Twitter & Instagram and visit <http://2wardequity.com/blog/> to subscribe to the 2Ward Equity newsletter:

Gone are the days when principals can make a viable argument about politics and the classroom. Education is not neutral, nor is politics. Schools are governed by law and run by administrators. Living in the shadow of the Texas state capitol, educators in my district live a political existence. Public schools are dictated to by state legislators who have a political interest in what is taught in schools. Textbooks adopted and purchased in the state of Texas and California determine the textbooks that are purchased for public schools across the United States.

In Texas, our state education leaders adopt history books that tell stories of "American" heroes and heroines but leave out the Indigenous heroes and heroines. Our textbooks tell stories of happy slaves who are treated fairly by their owners. A neutral textbook would tell the full history, or the book would be a collection of books rather than a bound book that serves as the authority and "apolitical" view of history.

Politics in a nutshell is all about one's personal views of the world and how they are impacted by the world. When teachers are asked to keep politics out of the classroom, a few ideas to keep in mind:

1. **Life is political.** Each student enters the classroom with personal background' teachers have background, biases, and beliefs.
2. **Textbooks are political.** Textbook-adoption companies write what the clients (state boards of education) tell

them to write; otherwise they will not purchase the books statewide. Teachers have to understand textbooks are chosen through the massive political process of textbook adoptions.

3. **Classrooms are political.** When students walk into your classroom, you are teaching your politics simply by being who you are and delivering the curriculum in the way you prefer.
4. **Nothing in life is neutral.** The food we provide to children has been politicized. Classroom management is politicized to the extent that schools feed the criminal-justice system through disproportion in discipline referrals.
5. **Schools are a part of a larger political system.** The main office of a school district is influenced by city, county, and state politics. Local companies have a vested interest in the curriculum taught in schools. City Council looks to the public and private schools to educate future citizens who will be civically engaged. School is a political place because so many adults have a vested interest in the future generation.

As a teacher, I was always prepared to discuss the pedagogical and educational reasons for my decisions to teach the chosen curriculum. I meticulously understood the state adopted curriculum and planned out my year using authentic text, read-alouds, written response, and response journals. As a writing teacher, I did not want my politics to be the only perspective the students received.

As teachers (in the world before this current reality), we are with the students five days a week nine months out of the year; we listen to their stories. If we have effectively built a safe, welcoming, and inclusive classroom environment, we understand the politics of the households they are growing up in. Each person brings their politics into the classroom. It's up to the teacher to pull together all the strings of the lived experiences, create the dialogue space for all voices to be heard, and provide protocols, processes, and critically reflective tools for students to come to their own understanding of what their politics will be.



Keeping politics out of the classroom is not an option

Holly Spinelli is an active member of the National Council of Teachers of English's Committee Against Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English. She began her career as an English teacher and student-rights activist in New York City public schools and continues this work in a public high school in the Hudson Valley of New York and as an adjunct instructor at SUNY Orange County Community College:

Teaching in today's classrooms is no easy task, and adding a contentious political climate to the mix creates an extra barrier for school communities to permeate. The heart of an educator's job is to teach students how to

navigate the world around them. This task extends far beyond teaching our core subjects' essential elements; educators must work together to help students learn to think critically, to consider multiple perspectives to make informed decisions, to develop empathy and strong communication skills, and to become actively engaged citizens who strive to improve their and others' lives.

These lessons, among others, are all parts of the political process. Yet, no matter how the world looks or what's happening within it, educators are often advised, and in some cases, required to "keep politics out of the classroom." The rationale behind this outdated sentiment is woven in the fabric of a teacher's identity as a role model and as the authority who holds the power to influence or, in drastic circumstances, intimidate students to align with the educators' views.

While these scenarios may, in their simplest forms, hold some kernel of truth, they are not viable excuses to separate politics from the classroom. Why? Because ignoring politics teaches students to ignore the real world. Praising silence or complete neutrality teaches students to remain silent and complacent when they are faced with a disagreement. How can we expect students to become innovative critical thinkers or successful communicators if silence is their only means to approach differences and difficulties? Silence and neutrality leave our students ill-prepared to become informed, rational thinkers and effective decisionmakers.

When someone chooses to become a teacher, that person accepts the responsibility to provide a safe and encouraging environment in which all students learn to traverse a variety of circumstances, especially those that are new and uncomfortable. If this teacher models silence and civility over truth, justice, and respect, then this teacher is doing his or her students a critical disservice.

Avoiding conflict teaches students to disengage with the world around them. This opposes a teacher's purpose: to get students engaged with their surroundings. Instead, educators should focus on presenting students with a multitude of perspectives on political topics relevant to their course content. This helps students make sincere, real-world connections with the education they receive in the classroom.

Next, educators can help students build critical-thinking skills, such as question development, source and fact-checking processes, and age-appropriate sentence starters to help them cultivate strategies to engage in respectful, meaningful discourse with others. Students need to learn how to dig beneath an issue's surface and determine where they stand in the political realm.

Furthermore, teaching students how to recognize multiple perspectives on an issue helps them learn to disrupt the status quo and to become the innovators upon whom future generations rely to make social, technological, and yes, political advances. Whether we like it or not, politics determine so many facets of students' educational experiences—from high-stakes testing, to gender equality through Title IX, to racial equality with desegregation in schools—these issues, among countless others, are products of political decisionmaking, and our students deserve to know how and why such decisions are made.

So, how should we respond when we're told to keep politics out of the classroom? Remind our communities that teaching is not an apolitical act. Schools and communities need to stop pretending that it is and let teachers do what they do best: inspire our students to become agents of positive change. We must teach our students the value of civic engagement and the power of their voices and opinions. Educators must teach students how to identify racially, socially, and morally unjust political actions, so these students can take the lessons they learn within our classrooms, mobilize, dismantle oppressive systems, and lead themselves and future generations to a more socially conscious and equitable society.



...Ignoring politics teaches students to ignore the real world.

- Holly Spinelli
in Education Week Teacher

"We cannot allow those topics to be censored in schools"

Dr. Rocio del Castillo began her career as a school psychologist in Peru and has dedicated her professional career to being an advocate for educational equity and social justice. Her rich and diverse experience includes serving for over 20 years in both public and private school systems, where she has received recognition and accolades for her work in the special education, bilingual, and dual-language settings. Rocio currently serves as assistant superintendent for special services in Huntley Community School District 158 (Illinois) and as an adjunct professor:

Politics is something that by definition affects all citizens, and that includes teachers and students. However, it also deals with complicated issues, which often arouse major differences among people with a wide diversity of opinions. I believe that it is not only appropriate to speak about politics in classrooms, but that it is also a way to communicate to students the concept that all ideas, as different as they may be, should be heard and deserve to be respected. Therefore, when a political debate arises in class, teachers should let it evolve naturally, as long as it is respectful and can provide the students with new knowledge and skills.

Education is inherently political, and teachers as members of our society are political beings. In their book, [The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education](#), Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy offer a perspective on how schools are and should be political, but not partisan, spaces. In the "political classroom," young people are learning to deliberate about political questions. It really is the process of deliberation that is the major skill being taught. And then, through deliberation, students are learning about political issues.

[Paulo Freire](#) is one of the most influential philosophers of education of the 20th century. In Freire's view, education is a form of politics and is never neutral. According to Freire, education can be used to reinforce structures of domination, but it can also be used to promote social transformation.

[Alyssa Hadley Dunn](#), an assistant professor of teacher education at Michigan State University, believes education, at its core, is inherently political. Dunn argues that a strict adherence to "neutrality"—meaning not expressing your views to students and avoiding political topics—is a tactic that can actually marginalize many students. Dunn states that neutrality is itself a political choice and is one that bolsters the status quo. What results is a classroom that potentially ignores the fears, interests, and concerns of many students.

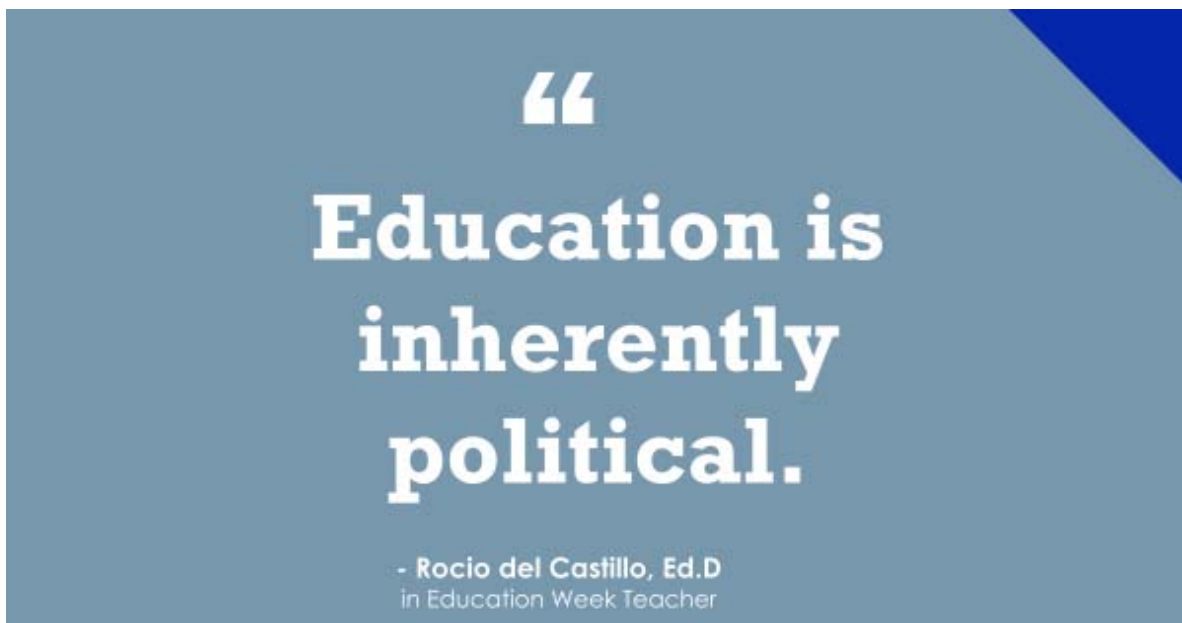
It is important that we address topics such as racism, immigration, civil rights, gender equality, gender violence, and the current situation in our country and the world in which we live. We cannot allow those topics to be censored in schools. Students have a right to know what is happening, as long as those topics are addressed with balance, adapting the information to their developmental stage and to individual and community characteristics.

How to talk about politics in class?

- Create a culture of fairness in the classroom.
- Approach the conversation respectfully.

- Encourage students to not be afraid to voice their own opinions.
- Develop your students' capacity to speak about politics.
- Expose students to the exchange of ideas. **Use protocols to structure your class discussions. For more information about formats for structuring a class discussion, visit Jennifer Gonzales' Cult of Pedagogy blog; [The Big List of Class Discussion Activities](#).**
- Consider multiple perspectives; encourage students to research and consider the evidence about any given issue.
- Model responding to people who disagree; students must be able to engage in discourse with those who disagree.
- Remain unbiased so your students can form their own opinions and be a moderator in developing the ideologies of your students.

When political topics are included in the school curriculum appropriately, it can communicate by example the essence of what makes communities democratic, and at the same time, develop the abilities students will need to live in and improve those communities. It is necessary to create inclusive spaces in which all students feel comfortable sharing their opinions. Create agreements in the learning community to respect and treat all opinions fairly, identify personal biases, and discuss the ideas, not the people who suggest the ideas



"Teaching is not apolitical"

Keisha Rembert is a passionate learner and fierce equity advocate. She was an award-winning middle school ELA and United States history teacher who now instructs preservice teachers. She hopes to change our world one student at a time. Twitter ID: @klrembert.

Teaching is not apolitical. Teaching is a political act. Political means relating to the affairs of a country. Education is one of the affairs of our nation. Teachers are asking students to exercise their right to receive an education and participate in the process of education.

It is the responsibility of an educator to teach students who are engaging in the process of education to be free, critical thinkers who are going to work for the betterment of society. Everything about that is political and necessary.

Herein lies the rub, there is a difference between being political and partisan. Society hears politics and thinks

in terms of partisan politics. Politics must be part of our classrooms if we are to empower students to dissect and challenge rhetoric, understand and discern democratic ideals, and be active citizens who work in service to humanity. These things cannot happen if politics exist only outside our classrooms.



Thanks to Angela, Holly, Rocio, and Keisha for their contributions!

Please feel free to leave a comment with your reactions to the topic or directly to anything that has been said in this post.

Consider contributing a question to be answered in a future post. You can send one to me at lferlazzo@epe.org. When you send it in, let me know if I can use your real name if it's selected or if you'd prefer remaining anonymous and have a pseudonym in mind.

You can also contact me on Twitter at [@Larryferlazzo](https://twitter.com/Larryferlazzo).

Education Week has published a collection of posts from this blog, along with new material, in an e-book form. It's titled [Classroom Management Q&As: Expert Strategies for Teaching](#).