A Toolkit for Divisive Times

A Guide to Help School Board Members Advance
Public Education in Polarized Environments

A TOOLKIT FOR DIVISIVE TIMES

We prepared this toolkit to help school board members like you navigate the challenges of today's polarized environments. As you will see, this resource is designed to be both practical and flexible since a one-size-fits-all approach would not work for all Florida districts.

Before getting into the components of this toolkit, let's first take a moment to discuss why this resource was developed. To do that, we need to address what it *was not* created to do:

- **It was not created to cause further division in our already divided communities.**
- **It was not created to advance a particular agenda or point of view.**

Rather, this resource was developed to provide you with tools, tips, and suggestions to help you keep your district focused on excellent, educational student outcomes.

So, what is the answer? What is the way forward?

Here at FSBA, we believe the way forward is through public school efforts that help ensure all students are successful. That's the only way that our great state will be able to ensure that all Florida communities are successful today, tomorrow and in the future.

⭐ **That is what this tool kit is all about. It is about cutting through the noise. It is about focusing on what unites us.**

And most importantly, it is about enabling local school boards to do the work they were called to do — ensuring all students are treated with dignity and respect and are provided the opportunity to succeed in school and in life and ensuring parents and community partners are active participants in this work.

That is the challenge ahead for school boards and school board members.

Please count on us here at FSBA to continue to provide you with resources you need to do your important work. This toolkit is the start of those efforts.

How This Toolkit is Organized

First up, we'll discuss:

Educational Equity —
What It Is, and What It Isn't.

Next up, we outline five core strategies for advancing your district's mission while also navigating topics that are dividing our communities:

- **Stay Student Focused**
- **Monitor Your Environment, but Avoid Opinion Wars**
- **Welcome Difficult Conversations**
- **Leverage Frontline Stories**
- **Lean On Unifying Messages**

While each of these strategies can be used independently, they're most powerful when used together, and consistently, over time.

That's the toolkit in a nutshell. We hope you find it useful in your work.

ADVANCING YOUR DISTRICT'S MISSION
WHILE NAVIGATING TOPICS THAT ARE DIVIDING OUR COMMUNITIES

1 **STAY STUDENT FOCUSED**

2 **MONITOR YOUR ENVIRONMENT, BUT AVOID OPINION WARS**

3 **WELCOME DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS**

4 **LEVERAGE FRONTLINE STORIES**

5 **LEAN ON UNIFYING MESSAGES**

EDUCATIONAL EQUITY—WHAT IT IS, AND WHAT IT ISN'T

As most board members well know, there are wide-ranging viewpoints and feelings about the term educational equity, especially right now:

- Some community members are dissatisfied with gaps in academic achievement and asking that equity plans be implemented.

- Some community members are saying "no way" to equity plans, fearing that these efforts will divide, not unite, their community.

- Some community members say that equity work requires taking away from one student group or school to give to another.

- Some community members say that equity work is the only way forward if we want to prioritize student achievement and strengthen our communities.

- Some community members are asking that district policies be reviewed with an equity lens, noting that some policies are outdated or biased.

- Some community members insist that student codes of conduct policies, like dress codes, be strictly enforced as they prepare students for real life and professional work environments.

- Some community members are using critical race theory (CRT) and educational equity interchangeably.

- Some community members are adamant that critical race theory (CRT) and educational equity are completely different and shouldn't be confused.

And the list could go on, and on.

Of course, we understand that some school districts have seen little community activity around equity issues. We also know that some school districts have seen all the above activity, plus outside influences at work.

So how can school board members wanting to advance educational goals help clear up the confusion and stay focused on excellent, education outcomes for all students?

Well, there are no easy answers. Unfortunately, easy solutions for complex issues rarely exist, especially when feelings are strong, and viewpoints are entrenched.

To have more productive conversations around educational outcomes for all students, we recommend starting with improving the understanding of what educational equity is, and what it is not.

Simply put, educational equity is a straightforward term with a singular purpose — ensuring all students are provided the opportunity to be successful in school and in life.

That's it. Nothing more. Nothing less.

Here are two practical examples that provide a wonderful way to explain educational equity to others.

As a parent...

- Every parent knows that each of their children is different and has unique needs.
- If your eldest child struggled to read in second grade, you'd work to ensure they were provided additional supports at school.
- Additionally, you'd become more diligent about reading time at home. Maybe you'd even purchase more books or go to the library.
- In contrast, your second child was an early reader and did well in school overall. They did, though, struggle in social situations and often needed additional comforting and encouragement to feel more at ease outside of the home.
- This family scenario is also a fitting example of equity. In most families, these types of adjustments are naturally made over time as parents work to provide each of their children what they need to be successful.

This is equity at work.

In a classroom...

- In a third-grade classroom, students not reading on grade level would be provided additional support so they can get on grade level. Everyone knows how important that is.
- Not reading on grade level in third grade can have huge implications for the following years of education.
- This is a known part of standard educational practices in schools.
- This is an example of educational equity at work in a classroom and in a school.
- Obviously, it's not about taking away resources from other students, but about helping all students get the kinds of supports they need to be successful. The students not yet reading on grade level need additional support to be successful.

This is equity at work.

The graphic below illustrates the difference between equality and equity. Developed by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, it helps to illustrate what equity is and what it isn't.

Infographic courtesy of the Robert Woods Foundation

Of course, we understand that there's more at play in the questions to school board members than a simple definition and straightforward examples can address. The misunderstanding of equity work has been widespread. It's therefore natural — albeit disheartening — that in some communities it has become difficult to talk about equity work without conflict.

That's why the conversation around the term equity is so critical.

- Equity work is not about further dividing our communities.
- Equity is not about "taking away" from one group to "give" to another.

Educational equity has always been about ensuring all students are successful. It's about removing barriers to student success. And it's about working to close achievement gaps when and where they exist and as required by both federal and state educational accountability systems.

Overall, that's the gist of this section. Navigating today's environment means fully understanding the term educational equity. We hope you find our simple definition, examples, and colorful graphic helpful in your work and that they help you be able to better explain this work to your constituents.

Next up, we'll look at practical tools and techniques to keep in mind as you work to stay student focused.

In fact, the next section is aptly titled "Stay Student Focused."

STAY STUDENT FOCUSED

STRATEGY 1

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> *Children are apt to live up to what you believe of them.*
> *—Lady Bird Johnson*

When you ask most school board members why they ran for their local school board, you'll hear responses like:

" I got involved in the PTO at my daughter's school, and that was the beginning of everything. Who knew at that time that I would run for school board?"

" My son has learning disabilities and I started getting involved at his school. Then I got involved on some district-level committees. Next thing I knew several people recommended that I run for the board. The rest is history."

" I'm a local business owner and I wanted to make sure that the young people in my neighborhood would have the skills needed to be successful."

"I wanted to make sure the parent point of view was being considered in discussions. I started to attend meetings and sharing my opinion and realized how important parent voice on the school board is."

" After my kids graduated from high school, I started tutoring at the middle school in my neighborhood. Because of that work, I was asked to participate on a referendum committee, which I really enjoyed. Next thing I know a good friend said I should run for the board, and I did. I love this work."

" I was a teacher and a principal before retiring and running for the board. I knew I could help make our schools stronger."

At the center of all of these statements are the students. They're the most important stakeholders in your district.

Education will always be a local issue—and sometimes a contentious one—because it's about the kids in our communities. And they need us all working together for them - educators, parents, and community partners.

Staying student focused is critically important for two key reasons:

First, remembering your "why" will sustain you in challenging times.

As one of the most accessible public entities in the U.S., school boards often become ground zero for the heated debates at play at the state and national level.

That's exactly what's happening right now. Simply by being more accessible, school boards have faced much of the pent-up anger and frustration from the pandemic. It's taken many forms and evolved over time, but regardless of how it looks in your district, it's likely been directed at you at some point over the last two years.

That's precisely why this reminder is here. It may sound simple, but it's important.

- Ask a family member or a friend to support you in these efforts — ask them to remind you after a rough board meeting or difficult conversation of why you do this work, and the positive impact you've had on your school board.

- Place a small reminder at the front of your board desk area or at your workspace at home, noting something like "It's about the kiddos" or with your favorite graduation ceremony picture or a photo from a special school event you attended as a board member.

Remembering your "why" will sustain you in times like these if you lean into it.

In short, establish a practice that helps you center on your "why." It's important to the future of our state. We need dedicated board members like you to continue to lead Florida's students.

Second, remembering your "why" is a powerful tool for positioning and advancing the important work in your district.

Here's a high-level example of how this can work in practice:

Imagine there's an agenda item for an upcoming board meeting that you know your community has strong feelings about, and you expect there will be a large turnout for public comments. This item could be related to the launch of an equity plan or simply be an initiative that connects to the work your district is doing to remove barriers to student success.

You've been monitoring social media and there is a good deal of heated commentary around the topic. Some vocal folks are against the item. You know, though, that a vote in favor of the item is the best decision for your district, students, and families.

Sounds like something that could unfold — or already has — in your district, doesn't it?

Your "why" can help you manage a situation like this.

That's because, when you need to bring a topic back to student success and excellent outcomes for all students, leaning into your "why" can have a powerful, positive effect.

So, let's tackle the scenario above with this approach in mind.

Remember your **WHY**

To start, don't underestimate the importance of acknowledging emotions when tensions are high.

It makes a difference, even if the person making an angry comment is dismissive of your efforts. Sometimes, what people need most is just to be heard. Community members — including students, teachers, parents, and staff —are watching. So, set the standard for approaching challenging conversations in a respectful manner and remember that you are setting an example for others.

Acknowledge the situation at the start of the meeting:

"I know emotions are high on this issue, and we want to thank the parents and community for coming out tonight and sharing their input and feedback."

"It's obvious from tonight's turnout that many community members have strong feelings on this issue. That's understood, and we recognize the passion around this topic."

"Please know that we hear you and recognize the deep feelings being expressed on this issue."

Next up, pivot hard to excellent, education student outcomes for all students.

When discussing the agenda item, put the topic in a student success frame:

"Our current achievement data shows that we still have gaps in achievement between student groups. As we look at this agenda item, we need to keep the focus on student success, and we must mean all students."

"We made a commitment as a community to work together to close achievement gaps and remove barriers to student success. The item under discussion this evening supports that work."

" When we value and lift up all children, we make our community stronger. What it takes to support each student may look different, but we must do this important work—with all students in mind."

"We can reach our goal of excellent, equitable outcomes for all students if the appropriate supports and resources are provided to our schools and teachers. I believe wholeheartedly that this initiative is a good start on that path."

"Federal and state accountability systems require us to work at closing achievement gaps, so this work is not a choice, it's a must."

"We need to dig deep to understand why we have gaps in student achievement and work together to address the barriers to student success. This agenda item is a good step in the right direction."

"I understand that this plan requires change, but we need to be open to change if we genuinely want all students to succeed."

Lastly, we've all heard the adage that feedback is a gift. Well, it's true — even when feedback is rough around the edges. At a minimum, feedback will help you navigate contentious environments more aptly. At its best, of course, feedback builds stronger and better solutions for school communities. Be sure to get feedback from all stakeholders, not only a vocal few. And listen to the feedback you are given.

Constructive feedback loops are an important tradition in local government and a crucial element in ensuring decisions you make reflect local priorities.

To do this, it's important to monitor your environment. That's what the next section of this toolkit is focused on.

MONITOR YOUR ENVIRONMENT, BUT AVOID OPINION WARS

STRATEGY 2

In times of heightened divisiveness, reading comments on social media can be brutal. Rumors fly, decorum is lost, and everyone has an opinion to share. That's why it's often easier to stay away from online chatter. After all, you want to stay focused on what's important — the success of ALL students in your district.
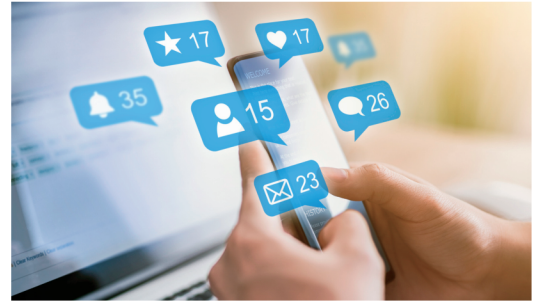
Don't ignore the chatter

You've made it a priority to listen to your constituents—whether it's local voters, community members, parents, school staff, or students. There are many ways to monitor the community's feelings about what is going on in your district.

Being in the social media spotlight as a public figure may not sound appealing but ignoring online chatter completely can put you out touch with the community's perception of your district and board. As an elected official, it's important that you know and understand what's being said by parents, staff, and voters, especially around the hot topics that may come up at board meetings.

That is precisely why you must be vigilant.

Of course, we're not saying that you must agree with all the information or opinions you read. You also don't need to read every comment, blog, or tweet out there — either about your district or K-12 education in general. Neither must you disagree with everything you read. What is important is that you read and know what is being shared from **all** sides.

You need to be aware of what the chatter and buzz is. Keep your antenna up and monitor opinions in your community closely. Watch for upticks in conversations to better understand how your community members feel about particular issues or initiatives. Many of you have been doing this for years, and its simply part of your daily routine. It is vitally important that you expose yourself to opinions that may not fully align with your own. If you only listen to your echo chamber, you will not represent your constituents fairly.

Listen, learn, and know you don't always have to reply

If social media platforms were physical places, they'd be noisy ones. We often think of them as a place to share our opinions, bits of daily life, and funny cat memes. However, one of the most valuable aspects of social media is that you can use it to listen to your community.

Some of their comments you read may anger you. Some may be completely factually incorrect. Some may seem just plain bizarre. However, some can be helpful in providing insight into what your community is thinking about the issues affecting your district. And, some may be true.

If you're feeling angry after reading comments, walk away. Do not engage until you've had time to calm down, think, and re-evaluate whether the comment even warrants a reply. You are the elected official and how you respond, or not, matters.

Let people know you're listening. If someone reaches out to you directly, thank them for their input and find the common ground you share.

If you're contacted directly or feel that a response is warranted, say something like, "I know this is a topic many people feel passionate about." Thank them for caring and listen to their concerns.

Practical steps for popular social networks

What does this listening look like in practice?

You don't have to be on every single social media platform and spend hours each day monitoring them to gauge sentiment in your community. But having a presence and knowing how to use these sites as listening tools is important. You can ask for feedback without stating your position without engaging back and forth. Here are some steps you can take on a regular basis to keep a finger on the pulse of your district stakeholders:

Facebook
- Like district and school pages. Keep an eye on the comments.
- Join local parent groups on Facebook to read concerns.

Instagram
- Follow district, leadership, and teacher accounts.
- Follow prominent organizations and people in your community.
- Search and follow relevant hashtags to monitor the conversations.

Twitter
- Follow district, leadership, and teacher accounts.
- Follow prominent organizations and people in your community.
- Use Twitter lists and searches to monitor conversations about your district and schools.
- Remember: Only about 1 in 5 people are on Twitter. A typical Twitter user may not be representative of your community.

Web
- Know any local parents who are bloggers? Teachers? Administrators? Keep an eye on those blogs and comments.
- Use Google Alerts to get any mentions of key terms like your name or your districts' name.

It is important to remember that when engaging on social media, you are under the requirements of the Sunshine Law.
Reading doesn't mean you must respond. This requires discipline.

WELCOME DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

STRATEGY 3

As a school board member, you're accustomed to managing differences of opinion on key issues in your community. That's always been part of the job.

Unfortunately, today's environment feels different because it is different.

School boards are under the microscope. Tensions are at all-time highs and community divisions are becoming ever more politicized.

While navigating this supercharged environment does indeed require new tools — that's precisely why this toolkit has been developed —tried-and-true methods are still helpful for diffusing heated situations. That's why we're detailing them here.

Naturally, these steps for managing difficult conversations can't solve the underlying causes of the controversial topics your district may be dealing with right now.
Hopefully, though, they can help.

Be proactive! Don't wait for difficult conversations to come to you. Instead, get out in front of a hot topic when possible. This may sound counterintuitive, but it's the best approach for creating an environment where conversations are productive, rather than destructive. You can't be a diverse, effective team if healthy conflict is not welcomed.

So, here's our first tip for managing difficult conversations:

We like to call this approach **"welcoming difficult conversations."**

Here's why this approach is so important, especially right now:

It provides a solid foundation for building a welcoming, inclusive, accountable culture where you can focus on goals and outcomes, rather than just responding to problems and concerns. It can generate solutions to issues that would otherwise not have been reached, and doing it before those issues become entrenched problems, which can be difficult to mitigate and keep out the news and off social media.

It helps bridge communication gaps between segments of your community - inspiring trust, growth, and action.

Lastly, you'll be modeling positive conflict resolution for your students, staff, and community. There's nothing more important than doing that during these challenging times. Everyone could benefit from seeing a positive model - YOU.

Of course, these proactive conversations may be in the form of one-on-one conversations or public forums. Because of the differences between the two, let's walk through each of these scenarios.

In both scenarios, it is important to remember that you are participating in these conversations as a school board member, not as a parent or an individual community member. Doing this will help you approach these conversations from an elected official's stance, which is essential to ensuring conversations have the best chance of being productive. This approach will also help you reduce feelings about being personally attacked, which is essential when putting students first.

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

One-on-One Conversations

These conversations may be with your colleagues, staff, students, parents, or community members.

- Remember that everyone is entitled to their perspective, feelings, and opinion.
- Give the person your full attention and let them express their concerns.
- Ask them what resolution they are seeking.
- If that resolution is not possible, explain why. Where possible, leverage one or two concrete examples of why what they're asking is not feasible or optimal.
- Make every effort to remain calm. Understand their frustration, but do not allow them to become disrespectful.
- Be wary of getting involved in parent complaints that may become future grievances that could lead to an unfair labor practice.

Public Forum and the Board Meeting

Before you make a decision that could be controversial, here are some suggestions:

- Present the facts and data behind the decision.
- Survey your stakeholders to gauge their understanding and feelings.
- If there is time, schedule workshop sessions where you can allow people to express their concerns before the decision is made.
- Take into consideration concerns that suggest a different decision might be possible or necessary. Be open to new and different perspectives.
- Develop a plan for how people will be informed once the decision is made. This is critical. Thoughtful, strong decisions often go off course without a detailed communication plan.
- Provide multiple avenues for two-way communication with your constituents such as monitored email, phone and social media accounts to get ahead of questions and concerns.
- Anticipate questions that will arise and be ready to explain the purpose and process.
- Develop brief talking points that allow you to convey the decision in conversations.

Open Forum and Public Comment

- Make sure participants are aware of any limitations to time and number of speakers.
- Set reasonable guidelines for how long each speaker can address the board in order to allow for disparity of opinions.
- Remain calm and convey empathy.
- Identify shared values and keep the focus on those.
- Even if an opinion goes against your own, allow it to be expressed.
- Give each speaker equal time and thank each one.
- Minimize disruptions and keep communication open.
- Remember that participants may reflect a very vocal minority and their perspective may not be representative of the larger community.

Lastly, think of difficult conversations as a process and difficult topics as opportunities. A single conversation or a single board meeting can have a significant impact, but it often takes multiple conversations and/or meetings to advance an issue, reach a compromise, or move forward. In fact, board members dedicated to excellent, education outcomes for all students will find that this work never ends and that welcoming difficult conversations is a critical tool in their toolkit.

LEVERAGE FRONTLINE STORIES

STRATEGY 4

> *History will judge us by the difference we make in the everyday lives of children.*
> *—Nelson Mandela*

As you work to advance efforts to close achievement gaps and ensure schools are welcoming environments, it's important that you use positive frontline stories to position your district's work—combining strong data points with good storytelling.

For the most impact, the goal should always be twofold:

Use data points to persuade on an intellectual level

Some critics and skeptics of education work will only be moved by data points, especially data points that connect to student achievement and other important student success indicators.

Use storytelling to persuade on an emotional level

When you tell someone a story, you're sharing an experience. Experiences are memorable and evoke emotion more than statistics.

INTELLECTUAL **+** EMOTIONAL

Here's an example:

Data Points: The half-cent sales tax was passed two years ago to fund the arts in school.

Story: *Meet Sarah, a high school junior who has consistently had poor attendance throughout her school experience. Upon passage of the sales tax, the chorus program was reinstated at her high school. Mrs. Smith, the chorus teacher knew about Sarah's musical talent and actively recruited her to join the chorus. Knowing of Sarah's tendency to miss school, she made her attendance a requirement of belonging to the chorus. Over the past 6 months, Sarah has only missed one day of school due to an illness.*

How to Leverage:
As you can see, striking data points come to life when you pair them with a frontline story. Improving attendance and reducing suspensions are impressive data points. In the end, though, they are still just numbers, an abstraction of the effect the program has had on the school's students. The impact of this initiative really hits home when you hear about how reinstating the chorus program has impacted Sarah's attendance.

When you want to put the sales tax on the ballot once again, it would be essential to leverage this story to advance those efforts. For instance, Sarah could be invited to speak at a board meeting.

The campus principal could present the data, and Sarah could talk about the impact the chorus program has had on her overall. Combined, you have a convincing argument for voters to once again vote for the sales tax initiative.

To wrap up, the drive for excellent, equitable, outcomes may take different paths in different communities. Whatever the path, though, never underestimate the power of frontline stories in advancing your district's efforts. Appealing to others both on an intellectual level and on an emotional level will make a difference in your efforts. Just ensure that both the data and the story are true.

Now, let's look at unifying messages. In divisive times, it's important to frame your work in ways that help you gain support from across your community.

LEAN ON UNIFYING MESSAGES

STRATEGY 5

It is important to find messages upon which all stakeholders agree. This will help bring the community together to enhance public education.

The following statements are examples of unifying messages:

- The goal of excellent, education outcomes for all Florida students can be attained if the appropriate support and resources are provided to districts, schools, and frontline educators.

- Our county is diligently working to close achievement gaps and improve outcomes for all students.

- Closing achievement gaps is critical for the future economic success of Florida.

- While closing achievement gaps may require added support for certain student groups, that doesn't mean resources will be taken away from other student groups.

- We all need to work together for the benefit of our students.

Closing thoughts

We recognize that the work of our Florida school boards in today's divisive environment often feels overwhelming and daunting. But it's important to remember that this moment in history, defined by difficult topics, is not unique. School boards have frequently navigated through the most contentious topics of our times, weathering those storms by staying focused on student success.

What we do know is that across the spectrum, teachers and school board members have high positive image ratings in their communities. This means local education leaders like yourself are well-positioned to advance student achievement to close achievement gaps.

It's important to keep the conversation focused on student outcomes, which is why we hope you'll use this toolkit as you manage potentially difficult discussions and decisions. It's also important to remember that equity work simply means ensuring students from all backgrounds are achieving at high levels, which will require rigorous instruction from caring and experienced educators.

Hopefully, though, you'll ensure that all Florida public school children get the personalized support they need to achieve in today's classroom and in tomorrow's workforce.

At FSBA, we'll be here to assist board members every step of the way.