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LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

**We're Not More Divided;
We're Fighting Ghosts.**

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Introduction

I heard something on *CBS News Sunday Morning* that stopped me cold.

Northwestern University researcher Eli Finkel was explaining what his lab had found about political polarization: we haven't actually grown further apart on the issues. We've just convinced ourselves we have. We've built elaborate mental villains, shadow versions of "the other side," and we're waging war against those phantoms instead of engaging with the real, complicated, sometimes-surprisingly-reasonable people who actually exist.

I've spent more than 25 years in education as a teacher, school administrator, state curriculum director, and now a district leader. I've sat in hundreds of meetings where people had stopped listening and started arguing with the version of their colleague they'd constructed in their heads. Finkel's research doesn't just describe American politics. It describes every one of those rooms, and every classroom where students watch adults model contempt instead of curiosity.

The Number That Should Embarrass All of Us

Here's the finding I can't stop thinking about: a 2020 study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* found that Democrats and Republicans overestimate how much the opposing party dehumanizes them by 50 to 300 percent. Not a little off. Spectacularly, devastatingly wrong.

We all choose the teams we cheer for, and the teams we root against, but it becomes a problem when we lose sight of the beauty of being able to participate. When we can no longer appreciate the perspective of the entire field, we all lose.

Finkel, who founded Northwestern's Litowitz Center for Enlightened Disagreement, frames it simply: we're "fighting phantoms." We've stopped encountering the people who disagree with us and started encountering our *idea* of them. This isn't just a civic problem. It's a learning problem, and our national education standards know it.

What Our Standards Are Already Telling Us

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) identifies civic competence, "the knowledge, intellectual processes, and democratic dispositions required of students to be active and engaged participants in public life," as the primary aim of social studies education. Its Theme X, Civic Ideals and Practices, frames exactly the questions our students are living through: What is the balance between rights and responsibilities? How can I make a positive difference? How do I engage my fellow citizens constructively?

The Center for Civic Education's National Standards for Civics and Government reinforce this with a framework of intellectual and participatory skills that goes beyond content knowledge. To be civically competent, students must learn to interact and to question, to answer, and, crucially, to deliberate with civility, as well as to manage conflict in a fair and peaceful manner. They must also learn to build coalitions, negotiate, and seek consensus: skills that are impossible to develop if we're only practicing arguments against opponents we've invented.

The National Institute for Civil Discourse (NICD) names the same core problem differently. Their Engaging Differences framework identifies three practices at the heart of constructive civic engagement: Empathy instead of vitriol, Listening for Understanding instead of hearing to overpower, and Humility instead of all-knowing. These aren't soft skills. They're the preconditions for democracy itself.



And the U.S. Courts' Guidelines for a Civil Discussion remind us that courtrooms, our most formal arenas of adversarial disagreement, are built on a profound civic commitment: that we differentiate facts from opinions, ask questions before assuming, and never mistake the loudest voice for the most credible one. Civil discourse, the courts tell us, is not the absence of disagreement. It is the disciplined practice of engaging disagreement well.

Disagreement Isn't the Problem

The goal isn't to disagree less. Finkel calls disagreement "the lifeblood of innovation." I'd go further and say that productive disagreement is how we discover what we actually value, and it's one of the most transferable skills we can help students develop. The question isn't *whether* we disagree. It's *how*.

Finkel's lab uses a deceptively simple improv exercise. One person rants for a minute about something that makes them furious. Then their partner does something unexpected: they don't rebut. They identify what the speaker *values* and what's underneath the anger, the thing they're actually trying to protect.

Not what you're against. What you're *for*.

I've watched this dynamic play out in leadership development programs and team meetings across schools and districts. The veteran administrator who seems resistant to change? She may be terrified that abandoning what works will cost kids the stability they desperately need. The newer leader pushing hard for innovation? He may have watched too many students fall through the cracks of a system that never made room for who they are. Both are trying to protect children. They've just been arguing with the villain they invented instead of the person in front of them.



Four Step-by-Step Strategies for Your Team

The following strategies draw on the U.S. Courts' Guidelines, the NICD's Engaging Differences framework, and Finkel's research to build the participatory skills our standards describe. Each can be adapted for classroom use with students or professional learning with adults.



Strategy 1: Establish Ground Rules Together (Before Any Hard Conversation)

Adapted from the U.S. Courts' civil discussion guidelines, this step asks participants to co-create their own norms before a high-stakes discussion, not to receive a list of rules, but to own them.

Step 1: Ask individuals to independently reflect: "What do you need in order to feel safe enough to say something you're uncertain about?"

Step 2: Share and compile responses as a group. Look for themes.

Step 3: Draft 3–5 shared agreements together. Anchor them in the U.S. Courts' civil discussion touchstones: differentiate facts from opinions; ask clarifying questions before assuming; moderate your tone; no eye-rolling, sighing, or checking out.

Step 4: Post the agreements where everyone can see them and revisit them if the conversation gets heated.

Standards connection: NCSS Theme X (Civic Ideals and Practices); Center for Civic Education participatory skills: interacting with civility and managing conflict.



Strategy 2: Listen for Values, Not Just Positions (The Finkel Reframe)

This is the core practice from Finkel's lab adapted for classrooms, faculty meetings, and IEP team conversations.

Step 1: One person shares their position on a topic for 2 minutes, uninterrupted.

Step 2: Their partner does *not* respond to the argument. Instead, they complete this sentence: "What I hear you caring most about is..."

Step 3: The speaker confirms or corrects the reflection. This is not agreement—it's acknowledgment.

Step 4: Partners switch. Repeat.

Step 5: As a pair, identify one value you share, even if your positions differ. Name it explicitly.

Standards connection: NICD principles: Listening for Understanding; Empathy without abandoning conviction. NCSS Theme IV (Individual Development and Identity).

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Strategy 3: Structured Deliberation (Practiced Disagreement, Not Debate)

Adapted from the U.S. Courts’ deliberative discussion model and aligned with the Center for Civic Education’s participatory skills framework, structured deliberation asks students to advocate for positions they may not personally hold, then drop the role and find consensus.

Step 1: Introduce a genuine, balanced question on a topic that matters to your students or community.

Step 2: Divide into pairs (Team A and Team B). Team A prepares the strongest case for “yes.” Team B prepares the strongest case for “no.” Each side presents for 2 minutes.

Step 3: Reverse positions. Team A now articulates Team B’s best argument, and vice versa.

Step 4: Drop roles. Each person shares their own actual view, now informed by having genuinely engaged the other side.

Step 5: As a group, search for common ground. Where do both positions share underlying values?

Step 6: Reflect: What did you learn? What surprised you? Did you hear yourself in the other side?

Standards connection: NCSS Theme X; Center for Civic Education: evaluate, take, and defend positions; NICD: Listening for Understanding; U.S. Courts’ deliberation model.

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Strategy 4: The Bridge Exercise (Finding Common Ground Without Losing Your Island)

A free popup resource accompanying this article, designed by Heather especially for us!



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Standards connection: Center for Civic Education: building coalitions and seeking consensus. NICD: Humility + Empathy. NCSS Theme V (Individuals, Groups, and Institutions).

BONUS



Why This Matters Right Now in Schools

NCSS reminds us that “civic competence rests on a commitment to democratic values, and requires the ability to use knowledge about one’s community, nation, and world.” The Center for Civic Education goes further: civic dispositions, including the willingness to engage difference with humility and good faith, develop slowly, over time, through what students experience in school.

What we model in our classrooms, our faculty meetings, and our leadership teams isn’t just professional behavior. It’s civic education.

Finkel’s research gives us both permission and an obligation to question our own mental model of the people we think we oppose. Not because our convictions are wrong. But because the person sitting across from us almost certainly isn’t the villain we’ve been rehearsing arguments against. And because our students are watching every move we make. The joy is in the journey. Not the one toward agreement, but toward actually seeing the person in front of you. That’s where connection lives. And it’s where transformational learning begins.

Sources & Further Reading

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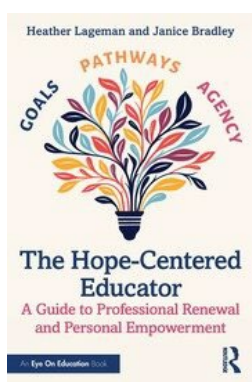
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Heather Lageman is a trusted friend, colleague, and confidante of everyone who knows her. She just published *The Hope-Centered Educator* with co-author Janice Bradley (Routledge, 2026), drawing on Hope Theory and hope-based leadership practices as well as authentic experiences from educators nationwide. She has worked with such notable organizations as Maryland ASCD, Learning Forward, Maryland Codes, and The Council of Educational Administrative and Supervisory Organizations of Maryland, chairs the Maryland Computing Education Steering Committee, and serves on advisory boards for Loyola University Maryland and Hood College. Heather is a founder of *xSELeatED*, which is showcased monthly on *The Worthy Educator*.  

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Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis from educators who are implementing new and innovative approaches in the classroom and at the building and district levels. Information on specifications and instructions to submit can be found online at theworthyeducator.com/journal.