

# Governance Tips: Equity in a Divided Community

The VSBA has received inquiries and requests from divisions for information on how to respond to equity issues in a divided community. The information below is provided to help school boards deal with the current climate.

Stay laser-focused on your students, their needs and your local actions. Respond as appropriate to critics, but reserve most of your energy for doing the good work of educating your community's children.

Stay focused on your division's priorities, supporting and leading the team that gets this important work done, and your primary purpose: student achievement. Refocus the conversation on what your division is doing to achieve its equity priorities. Consider the following:

- *“Some people are using terminology like ‘critical race theory’ in ways that are confusing, but our commitments here in ABC community to making sure all students get what they need to be successful are pretty simple: ...”*
- *Highlight aspects of your strategic plan or division mission and values that reflect your work toward educational equity, for example: serving all students, ensuring all students are treated fairly, empowering all students to succeed, working to close achievement/opportunity gaps across the system and making sure our schools are safe and inviting places for all children to learn.*

Be persistent about promoting your positive vision of education, opportunity and inclusion in your community. Advocate and reiterate your school division's values. Routinely remind your staff, families and community of your school division's shared values, which may include values like fairness, respect, inclusion, kindness, responsibility, equity, adaptability, etc.

Anticipate and accept that this issue brings out big emotions. Strengthen your ability to hear people who are emotionally charged without becoming dismissive, defensive or emotionally charged yourself. It is not appropriate to dismiss the content of constituents' concerns simply because we don't agree, or they might be expressed in a way that is uncomfortable for us.

Attitudes around educational equity, diversity and inclusion are divided right now in the United States. No matter what your division does, there is almost certainly going to be a wide variety of opinions about it. There is no one course of action that is universally supported. Whether your division is doing very little related to educational equity or whether your division is actively pursuing it, your motives and actions may be called into question. For this reason, it is important to be clear about what actions your division is taking and why.

Be able to confidently articulate your “why” in your own words. Having clarity about student needs that are guiding your decisions and actions will give you strength to stay on course if you are questioned and not be pulled into unproductive debates. There is no benefit in debating about whether a particular word or phrase like “equity” or “critical race theory” (CRT) is being used correctly. Stick to terms you have already used and defined in your community to describe the work you are doing to improve outcomes for all students.

## Tips for dealing with abusive speech.

- ① Be as brief as possible.
- ② Remind them of the rules of decorum.
- ③ Be meticulously factual.
- ④ Avoid emotional engagement.

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Be honest and emotionally neutral in your assessment and description of your community's current reality. Acknowledge any division that exists and resist the urge to minimize differences. It is disingenuous and harms trust. Use emotionally neutral words and phrases such as:

- *"This is an area where our community has differences of perspective ..."*
- *"We acknowledge that there is a wide variety of opinions on this issue ..."*

Have strong procedures in place to ensure fair and safe public meetings. Given the renewed interest in citizens utilizing the public participation feature at governing board meetings, it is imperative that divisions review their policy and share that policy with the public to avoid questions or confusion during a meeting. Governing boards have flexibility in how they structure the opportunity to hear from the public. If you have not already, talk with local law enforcement leaders about how to work together, if needed, to ensure the safety of public meetings or address potential harassment.

Utilize active listening strategies. Resist the urge to lump those critical of educational equity together and dismiss their concerns. Educational equity work asks us to seek to understand the perspectives of others. What personal concerns and emotions are driving them to think and behave as they are? Listen respectfully to those who are critical of educational equity and emphasize common ground, even if it is small.

Acknowledge that there are some instances where you will need to agree to disagree. However, while it is important that you remain open and respectful, bigotry, racism and abusive language should not be tolerated. When this occurs, calmly, respectfully, and firmly reiterate your personal and organizational commitment to equity and the celebration of all members of your educational community.

Be aware of who is present and who is not. Consider whether those present represent the totality of your community. Does the majority of those coming to speak at meetings accurately reflect the population you serve? If not, how can you increase opportunities to hear from the rest of your community?

Be conscious of nationalized campaigns. While there may be varying opinions within your community, boards should also be conscious of the growing presence of national groups, critical of educational equity, that are attempting to influence local boards through a variety of tactics. Do not let yourself get distracted from the good work you are doing to address the needs of all students.

Consider whether additional community discussion is needed. It is much harder to stereotype and dismiss each other if we truly know each other. Supporting strong relationships within your educational community is one way to help avoid polarization. Point out the many opportunities to provide input into division decision-making. If needed, set aside time for people to connect and discuss the issues, outside the regular board meeting, to create greater understanding of your division's equity goals.

Remember, you are not alone. More and more divisions are working to address opportunity gaps and increase student achievement. Remember to connect with others you trust. Talk about your experiences, share your concerns, seek support and guidance.

Finally, remember that self-care is a leadership decision. Leaders who take care of their personal needs for rest, activity, social support, and good nutrition are better able to make decisions under pressure than people who are depleted, stagnated, exhausted, or hungry. Take extra care of yourself when stress levels are highest (especially in advance of big public meetings and times of anticipated conflict) and encourage the rest of your division's leadership team to do the same.