



# CIVILITY AND SOCIETY

## How to boost civil discourse in K-12 classrooms

**A**MERICA IS STRUGGLING WITH CIVILITY. According to a 2018 study from KRC Research, [Civility in America: A Nationwide Survey](#), Americans report a severe civility deficit, with 93% identifying a civility issue and 69% classifying it as a major societal problem.

Incivility goes beyond rude words and actions. It represents a complete disregard for the belief systems of others. With ethics, quality of life, health and civility so closely intertwined, however, more people are seeing the importance and necessity of civil interactions for society to thrive. Lack of civil behaviors within the nation's educational system, workforce or communities at large can threaten the greater good.

"Our society is more polarized than ever. That, paired with the nature of communicating electronically, which is devoid of the nuances of emotion and nonverbal cues, makes it essential we teach our students how to have a civil conversation," says Nicole Gianfredi, principal at Timberlane Middle School in Pennington, N.J.

So how can educators help students rise above the current climate of incivility? This SmartFocus on Social and Emotional Learning, sponsored by the Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab at Rutgers, offers a blueprint for building civil discourse in the classroom. Educators offer practical insights on how to integrate social and emotional skills into lessons, create an environment for honest discussion and teach the importance of civic participation.

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## FACTORS INFLUENCING INCIVILITY

What is at the root of the incivility we are seeing today? And what effect could it have on students? According to education experts, outside forces influence the way K-12 students treat each other.

“We are living in a time where public, business and political leadership don’t model how to navigate courageous conversations to resolve differences and compromise for the common good,” says Laura Bond, former secondary social studies teacher and current board member of the New Jersey Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

“National media and social media aren’t broadcasting leaders treating others with civility, empathy, respectful listening and engaging in disagreement with an open mind to find a path forward.”

The rapid rise of digital technology and an explosion of online information means people are inundated continuously with demands for their time and attention. Constant connection via mobile phones and email is a phenomenon that didn’t exist even 15 years ago. Twitter and Facebook feuds are now


commonplace and almost an accepted norm.

Lack of eye contact leads to lack of inhibition online, with anonymity working as another chief contributor of digital incivility. Anyone with a computing device can blast opinions, no matter how inaccurate or inappropriate, to a wide range of audiences.

This relentless activity and immediacy leaves individuals overwhelmed, stressed and anxiety-ridden. These feelings can give way to aggravation and aggression, with civility being neglected.

There also is the issue of group polarization, often fueled by online media. Harvard Law School’s Cass R. Sunstein [writes about this topic](#), saying that when people only listen to those who think like them, they risk developing biased perspectives. Group polarization narrows belief systems, crippling people’s ability to understand, respect and sympathize with those who have a different outlook.

Leaders who spend significant time with students note that the urgency of addressing these issues, even among the youngest learners of the nation, is palpable.



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# Standing Up for Civility

What if there was a way to decrease bullying, classroom disruptions, school dropout rates and violence among youths? Rutgers' Social-Emotional and Character Development (SECD) Lab aims to do all of those things by building students' social and emotional learning competencies. [Research](#) shows SEL, when combined with an engaging, [caring school climate, fosters high academic achievement](#) and reduced behavioral issues for students.

SEL also helps nurture civil discourse. The "Students Taking Action Together" initiative, known as STAT, from the SECD Lab weaves instructional strategies for building empathy, perspective-taking, emotion regulation, problem-solving and communication skills into teachers' existing curricula. Aimed at middle- and high-school social studies and civics instructors, STAT includes rigorous discussion activities designed to cultivate responsible debate and constructive social action. These activities focus on history, current events and issues specific to students' communities and schools. The goal is to nurture an environment of student empowerment that leads to effective civic participation.

STAT instruction in a classroom could include questions on existing curriculum topics such as the Civil War, works of fiction or nonfiction that students are assigned, or a discussion about the ethics and issues surrounding cheating in school.

Grace Rivetti, school counselor at Parsons Elementary School, says, "The STAT approach is beneficial to students of all ages because it teaches and promotes civil discourse, respect and peace. I believe that students who can understand and see more than one perspective, will become more empathetic, well-rounded, open-minded, respectful and productive members of society." ■

"The process of civil discourse — gathering, listening, debate, forming an opinion and taking action — is critical to our democratic society," Gianfredi says.

"We have to turn the tide to break through social pressures ... and embrace opportunities to learn the skills to navigate courageous conversations with civility," Bond states.

## CIVIL DISCOURSE IN THE CLASSROOM

Today's students arrive at school with their own opinions or prejudices.

"Both in and out of the classroom, children and adults will not always share the same opinion, perspective, or belief. The purpose of civil discourse is not to persuade one another to have the same opinion or belief, but rather to foster understanding," says Grace Rivetti, school counselor at Parsons Elementary School in North Brunswick Township, N.J.

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"Educators are well-positioned to help instill values that can awaken social transformation. The goal is for schools to be a safe haven, where students are free to exchange thoughts and receive feedback on their ideas without fear," Rivetti says. Teaching students how to engage in civil discourse allows them to support — rather than undermine — peers, their school, community and society at large.

"When we learn to navigate conflicting points of view with skill, we produce better thinking, outcomes and shared understandings for the problem at hand," Bond says. "Championing through conflict builds connectedness, psychological safety and trust which are all necessary ingredients for healthy productive relationships."



# BRINGING CIVIL DISCOURSE TO THE CLASSROOM

“Students Taking Action Together” from Rutgers’ Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab contains strategies to support multidiscipline instruction through civil discourse, says Laura Bond, former secondary social studies teacher and a current board member of the New Jersey Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

“Integrating civil discourse lends well to a variety of current teaching strategies from problem or inquiry-based learning to Socratic seminars and debates within the social studies curricula,” Bond says.

## STAT aims to help educators:

- **BUILD SEL SKILLS:** Increases students’ perspective-taking, empathy, problem-solving, communication, emotion regulation, respectful listening and civic engagement.
- **ENHANCE CURRICULA:** Works within existing content for history, current events and problems specific to one’s school.
- **PROMOTE STUDENT VOICE:** Amplifies student voice and empowerment.
- **IMPROVE CIVIC DIALOGUE:** Opens a pathway to greater participation in the civic life of schools and communities.
- **ALIGN WITH STANDARDS:** Meets national and state social studies learning standards.

## The STAT instructional strategies include:

- 1 **Norms** to help establish guidelines for safe, appropriate classroom behavior and foster positive relationships and communication.
- 2 **Yes-No-Maybe** that encourages perspective-taking and respectful listening by having students take positions on issues and explain their reasoning to peers.
- 3 **Respectful empathetic debate** in which students rotate and argue both sides of an issue, deepening their knowledge and perspective.
- 4 **PLAN** — an acronym for Problem Description, List of Options, Action Plan and Notice Successes — which teaches problem-solving and ties into lessons about major historical events, current events and issues such as bullying, gang involvement, substance abuse, cheating and inclusion.

The STAT approach helps train students to be informed, contributing members of society, according to Bond.

“Students engage in civil discourse learning experiences that prepare [them] for active citizenship and to become change agents who are ready to participate in our democracy,” Bond explains. “This is a moral imperative for public education.” ■

**To learn more about STAT and access teaching strategies, visit <https://www.secdlab.org/request-access>.**

## FOSTERING CIVIL DISCOURSE

Instructional strategies aimed at teaching students how to engage in effective civil discourse are now being employed at many schools throughout the nation. Teachers across disciplines are integrating learning activities that focus on how to listen, express an idea and deliver feedback that is fair and constructive. There is greater emphasis on kindness and empathy. The goal is to build an environment where students can exchange ideas and foster connections — two skills young people will need in society and in the workplace, Bond notes.

“Civil discourse can empower citizens and communities to strive with purpose and competency through the emotional soup of navigating contentious issues,” Bond says. “Civil discourse honors the dignity and

potential of the individual to improve the quality of life for the common good.”

Bond says activities around civil discourse also help students see their role in the world and how they can make a meaningful contribution.

“Engagement in civil discourse in schools has the potential to foster greater inclusivity and human connection that feeds students’ desires for belonging and yearning to become something greater than they imagined possible,” Bond adds.

Gianfredi concurs. “Our world is so digitally advanced, but we are still humans that crave interpersonal connection,” she asserts. “Our country and our future depend on the ability of people engaging in civil discourse.” ■

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## ABOUT STUDENTS TAKING ACTION TOGETHER

Students Taking Action Together (STAT) is an initiative by Rutgers University’s Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab, supported by the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust. STAT is a set of teaching strategies that teachers can seamlessly incorporate into their current curriculum content that simultaneously enhances students’ perspective-taking, empathy, problem solving, communication, emotion regulation, and civic engagement. STAT procedures also can be used by school support professionals in group settings, particularly with students in grades 5-12.

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All materials can be accessed at [www.secdlab.org/STAT](http://www.secdlab.org/STAT).