

How To Inspire Positivity In The Classroom During An Election That's Anything But

By VIRGINIA ALVINO YOUNG · NOV 2, 2016



Teacher Michelle King helps a discussion about first amendment freedoms, privacy and voter motivation through the lens of ballot selfies at the Environmental Charter School on Wednesday, Nov. 2, 2016.

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Sage Arnold, 13, is not a big fan of this year's election.

“When I was little I watched one of the debates between Obama and Mitt Romney,” he said. “I couldn’t really understand a lot of it, but it sounded really civilized and mature.”

Arnold, and many of his fellow eighth graders at Pittsburgh's Environmental Charter School, said that is not the case with this year’s debates. They’re upset to hear “bickering” between the candidates, Arnold said.

Elections offer educators ready opportunities to teach government, the electoral process and democracy. But this year’s unique presidential season has made some teachers weary.

Not Michelle King and Nick Kaczmarek.

In their diverse homeroom, they emphasize empathy and community. The current election has prompted lessons about finding commonalities amongst one another.

“So we want to practice (those) ... discussions, particularly in this contentious election,” King told a class a week and a half before voting day. “Because you will inherit this country to lead, and we can’t expect you to do that work without having practiced it.”

Assignments have included role-playing around issues of immigration and police brutality, where students have adopted various personas.



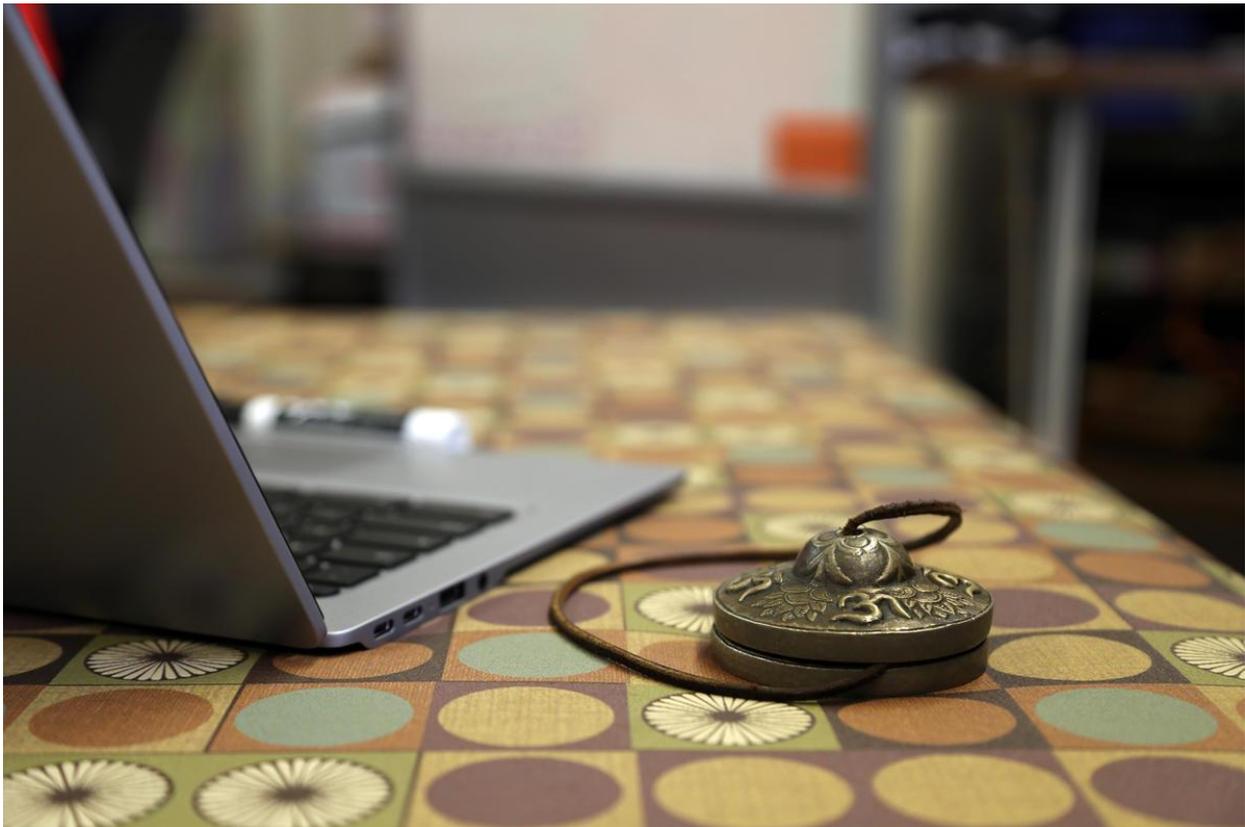
Mattias Hanbury, 13, of Highland Park checks his notes during a discussion about ballot selfies during the 2016 presidential election during a morning class at the Environmental Charter School in Regent Square on Tuesday, Nov. 2, 2016. Teacher Michelle King encourages the students to consider several sides of every argument. Do selfies encourage participation? Or are they a violation of privacy? Students like Hanbury hash it out.

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“What is it like to really sit and hear somebody that has a different opinion than you, like a fundamentally different opinion than you?” said King.

Nevaeh Grubb, 13, like most of the class, watched all three presidential debates. She said she had a real problem with the way candidates spoke to one another. Grubb is not a huge Hillary Clinton fan, she said, and had a somewhat nuanced view of Donald Trump.

“Some of the stuff he says is good, like we need to stop policing for other countries,” she said. “No offense to people being terrorized by ISIS, but what about America? What about the killings here?”



Environmental Charter School teachers Michelle King and Nick Kaczmarek use Tibetan bells, wind chimes and rain sticks to corral middle schoolers mid-conversation. "When I raise my voice or yell, it brings negative energy into the space," King said. "We use more calming sounds that still rise above their voices, but brings us all back together without disrupting the supportive learning environment we worked so hard to create."

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She said she's upset that there have been accounts of racist and anti-Semitic behavior displayed at Trump rallies, and the candidate has not come out strongly against it.

"It's a piece of crap," Grubb said. "Like, first of all, why is anyone still on race and color? Like, what? We're building all these great technologies. And for Donald Trump to be fueling that fire - you want to run for president, but you're talking about black people saying we're all in poverty and what do we have to lose."

King and Kaczmarek's students are taught to take campaign rhetoric seriously, but with the expectation that promises and pandering don't always lead to action. Not so for many other classrooms.

A [report by the Southern Poverty Law Center](#) looked at the so-called "Trump effect" – that some things said by the Trump campaign are producing a lot of fear and anxiety for students of color. It also found some [students have been](#)



Eighth grader Malik Nicholson, 13, of Penn Hills reclines during a lesson at Environmental Charter School on Wednesday, Nov. 2, 2016. Teachers invited students to address the new American president on their five most pressing concerns.

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["emboldened" to use more racial slurs](#), although none of the students in this class said they'd seen such behavior.

But Trump's [rhetoric regarding women](#) is also striking to these students.

"We all come from homes who have told us how beautiful and important we are, but some people

don't have that," said Elise Thompson.

Classmates Sophie Marsland-McCann, and Cara Burns, all age 13, agreed. They said hearing things like "pig" and "nasty woman" on television from a presidential candidate can validate those negative ideas.

"I know he thinks he can do anything, but that's not true," said Marsland-McCann, "so I don't listen to him. But deep down inside, a bunch of other people do. I know myself. I'm confident. I got this. But a lot of girls are not self-confident."

"I feel the same way," Thompson said. "They look at themselves and say, 'Well that woman is gorgeous, but she's considered a pig.' What does that make me?"

Their male classmates worry about the rhetoric, too. Arnold and Henry Hilf, also 13, said they don't agree with people who defend Trump's comments.

"It's really disappointing to hear that," Arnold said. "As a boy, that's not how it is, and my friends have said some pretty foul things, but not to that scale."

"As a 70-year-old man, he should know better," said Hilf.

A 2016 report from the Southern Poverty Law Center found that the presidential election has produced an alarming level of fear and anxiety among children of color.

Here are the highlights:

- More than two-thirds of the teachers reported that students—mainly immigrants, children of immigrants and Muslims—have expressed concerns or fears about what might happen to them or their families after the election.
- More than half have seen an increase in uncivil political discourse.
- More than one-third have observed an increase in anti-Muslim or anti-immigrant sentiment.
- More than 40 percent are hesitant to teach about the election.

Richard Milner, director of the Center for Urban Education at the University of Pittsburgh, said students across the country are struggling with this election.

Elections are always challenging because teachers and students have strong beliefs, he said, but this year is different.

“Teachers still struggle with having conversations about race as a central element of the work they should be doing,” Milner said. “When you throw in issues of immigration (and) segregation, it makes it that much more complex for teachers who have great intentions but are underprepared.”

And when you don’t talk about difficult issues, like debate comments or police shootings, you get what Milner calls the “null curriculum.”

“Students are learning something about priorities, about what it means to live in a democracy that would allow these things to happen,” Milner said.

He said without addressing the emotional concerns of students, young people have a hard time connecting to their education. Teachers should start acknowledging these things, Milner said, and create rules of engagement that clearly define what is and is not acceptable.

“We want students to be passionate about their views,” he said. “But we also want them to be able to substantiate those views with not only what would be considered the facts, but also their experiences.



Ava Lamory, 13, jots notes during a class debate on the merits of election selfies at Environmental Charter School in Regent Square on Wednesday, Nov. 2, 2016.

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Students' experiences should be seen as legitimate forms of evidence from which they can draw.”

The 2016 election has challenged the premise of facts themselves, Milner said. What used to be taken for granted as a lesson about the electoral process or general democracy has been [called into question](#).

The SPLC study, published in April, showed [40 percent of teachers are hesitant to even talk about election](#). Many worry about backlash from parents and administrators, according to respondents.

King said exposure to these politics are critical, especially for students whose personal identity is wrapped up in rhetoric, like young women and students of color.

“That healing is critical,” she said. “You can’t do this work without healing being a part of it and leaving space for that healing to happen, whether it’s letting that conversation go a little bit further or leaving time for some writing.”

The students are fairly homogenous in their accepting ethos, but King said she welcomes diverse political opinions – as long as they’re voiced in a civil manner.

“As contentious as this is, it may be a gift,” she said. “We may wake up and say we don’t want to live like this. We’ve got to find a way to be with each other. Because we need each other.”

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