

## **SEL Strategy №4: Facilitate Productive Conversations about Controversial Issues**

SEL can help students develop the personal qualities and skills necessary for democratic participation. They can learn to argue passionately for a belief, opinion, or conviction while listening well to people with different views and treating them with respect. Active listening and anger management skills can be useful when an issue or incident triggers strong feelings. Building on those skills, shrewd facilitation by the teacher can turn hot topics into teachable moments.

## Facilitate Productive Conversations about Controversial Issues

### Activity: Opinion Continuum

- In preparation for this activity, make two signs, one saying “Strongly Agree” and the other saying “Strongly Disagree.” Post them in opposite corners of the classroom. Ask, “What’s an opinion?” Elicit that it’s a strong belief, judgment, or way of thinking about something. Sometimes, it’s based on fact and sometimes not.
- Explain that the purpose of this activity—called Opinion Continuum—is to help students develop skills in expressing their opinions and arguing for them while listening to and respecting others who have opinions different from theirs. Ask, Do you agree that these are essential skills for building a caring classroom community? Why? Why not? Tell the students you’ll make a statement, and they are to go to the appropriate place according to whether they strongly agree with the statement, strongly disagree, or are somewhere in between.
- Once the students have taken their places, ask for volunteers from each location to explain their opinion. Encourage some dialogue among students with differing opinions, reminding them that this is a good opportunity for practicing active listening. If students change their minds after hearing the arguments, they can change places. Below are some suggested statements. Choose those that will be most relevant to your group and bring forth a range of opinions.
  - The best flavor of ice cream is vanilla
  - Soccer is the best sport
  - Parents should put limits on the amount of time young people spend looking at a screen (computer or TV)
  - The way to be popular in our school is to be a good at sports
  - “Sticks and stones can hurt my bones, but names can never hurt me”
  - If someone is mean to you, it’s best to ignore it
  - The hardest thing about being a teen-ager (or almost a teenager) is that adults boss you around
- After the activity is over and students return to their seats, ask them how it felt to share their opinions and listen to other points of view.

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**Activity:** Guidelines for Turning Hot Topics into Teachable Moments

- Middle and high school students are aware of what's happening in the world. If we provide brave and supportive classroom spaces where students can share thoughts and feelings constructively, we can foster powerful feelings of group solidarity and priceless teachable moments. Here are some suggestions:
  - When a major event occurs that you know will be on students' minds, invite students to share feelings, thoughts, and reactions. When such an event occurs, Jasmine, who teaches Literature and Composition to 9th and 11th graders, opens her classes by asking, How is your heart today? What do you need from the community today.
  - As students share their thoughts, feelings, and concerns, listen and paraphrase. Reflect and validate students' feelings.
  - Once the initial shock has passed and you've helped students process their initial reactions, lead them to explore underlying issues and consider taking action.
  - Provide accurate info. Don't let misinformation and stereotypes go unchallenged.
  - Generate questions. By emphasizing good questions over right answers, you prepares students for the complexity of the world and the wealth of information available.
  - Identify societal and historical patterns that may be at work.
  - Mourn together: Honor those who have been lost or harmed.
  - Highlight acts of solidarity: Look for the helpers.
  - Take loving action.
- Your students may always remember how during a time of trauma and turmoil they found comfort in each other's company, felt connection, and took action.