

THE OFFICE FOR CATHOLIC SCHOOLS HIGH SCHOOL NEWSLETTER

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Staying Out of Politics ... While Maintaining Your Integrity

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I have been a high school social studies teacher through the last three presidential elections. In 2016, I was also the principal of the high school where I was co-teaching 11th grade US History and had a blast being able to weave what was going on with our political landscape into our every day lessons. I had prepared my students for discussions, debates, and heated arguments leading up to the presidential election. What I was **not** prepared for was **day after** the election.

Politics are not neutral – they become personal, emotional, and seep into every facet of our lives. Looking back, it was naive of me to believe that my teaching staff would be anything but neutral the day after the election. When I came onto campus on November 9th 2016, I came back to a faculty divided.

Some teachers were ready to start business as usual. Some teachers were a wreck and unfit to be in their classroom for that day. Some teachers wanted to talk through their emotions; others wanted to shut down any talk of politics or what happened the night before.

Your role in the classroom affects your students beyond the content that you cover. Your political affiliations can strengthen or dissolve relationships with your students. How do you reconcile being an emotional and political human while also being neutral in the classroom? In this issue of the High School Newsletter, I ask you to consider some questions before navigating this political landscape, we delve into trauma informed teaching and finally, we discuss how schools around the Archdiocese are creating community in a virtual landscape. I hope this helps you start your November! - JPK

NAVIGATING POLITICS

THE CHALLENGE OF
STAYING NEUTRAL
DURING A HEATED
POLITICAL YEAR

TRAUMA INFORMED TEACHING

Using research based
techniques to think
about implementing
when dealing with
traumatized students.

BUILDING SCHOOL SPIRIT IN A VIRTUAL YEAR

Read about what High
Schools are doing
around the Seattle
Archdiocese to create
community in this
virtual school year

TO BE OR NOT TO BE POLITICAL?

There are many strong opinions about what teachers should and should not say in their classrooms. In public schools, many districts have guidelines about teacher self-expression and parameters that they must have when championing political causes (especially when it comes to how bargaining affects other teachers and colleagues). In Catholic schools, each school has its own professional guidelines for educator expectations, especially when it comes to the tender issue of politics. Overarchingly, there are ways to maintain one's integrity as an educator and still maintain within the parameters of classroom neutrality when it comes to political beliefs.

When embarking on political discourse, consider the following:

1. Before you choose to engage in political discourse, have you established norms, agreements, and conversation frameworks to ensure an inclusive classroom environment?
2. If you are presenting a controversial perspective, do you have enough information to be able to present both the Catholic point of view and if different, the arguments for the opposing point of view?
3. If a political conversation goes sideways or in a manner in which you did not prepare, how will you make sure that students have time to process and reflect, what are your next steps to ensure they still feel safe and heard in your classroom?
4. And finally, have you discussed the expectations of your school leadership about political discourse and appropriate parameters for your community?

It is imperative that your school leadership is supportive of your instructional plans. Don't hesitate to invite your administrators and department chairs to drop in on your classroom to provide feedback and support – they are the instructional leaders of your school !

Collaboration does not only have to be with and amongst colleagues. Be sure to reach out to your community and ask for support as well – there are many passionate community members amongst you who would appreciate partnering with you to ensure multiple points of view. Reach out to your administration or anyone at the Office of Catholic schools if you need more information.



“I sometimes worry that, even though there can be really good ethical reasons for teachers to share [political perspectives], in a very polarized time that sharing can be misinterpreted. And if it's misinterpreted by the public or by parents as teachers trying to get kids to adopt their beliefs, then I think we could have a big problem.” – Diana E. Hess, *The Political Classroom, Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education*

Catholic Political Perspectives

According to the National Catholic Register study (October 2020)

<https://www.ncregister.com/news/where-catholic-voters-stand-on-issues-candidates-ahead-of-2020-election>

Catholic voters, divided mostly along party lines, favor the election of Joe Biden over President Donald Trump. Biden's lead among Catholic voters narrowed in several swing states and among Catholics who attend Mass weekly.

Asked about upcoming presidential election, respondents overall favored Biden over Trump 52% to 40%. These numbers are virtually unchanged from previous polls conducted by RealClear Opinion Research in partnership with EWTN News in late August and September.

78% of Catholic voters said that they were more likely to support candidates who protect religious freedom for people of faith. This included majorities of both women and men, as well as majorities of Republicans, Democrats, and Independents, and majorities of every range, geographic region and race surveyed.

Catholics who say they believe all of the Church's teachings prefer Trump's policies, 55%-39%.

Catholics who say they accept everything the Church teaches told pollsters they are more likely to vote for Trump over Biden, 56%-38% the poll found.

TRAUMA INFORMED TEACHING

DEFINING TRAUMA IN OUR VIRTUAL WORLD

We use the word “trauma” to acknowledge abuse, neglect, disaster, and the experiencing or witnessing violence; according to the Center of Disease Control, “trauma is possibly the largest public health issue facing our children today.” Today, our students are going through traumas not typically classified as such; the trauma of experiencing a loved one dying from COVID, a mass pandemic shutting down the structure of their known world, the stress of families dealing with job loss, child care, homeschooling, and the feeling of neglect from daily interactions between and amongst their peers, teachers, families, and social groups. The continuous “unknown” of what the future holds—while not a new phenomenon—certainly has upped the ante when a seemingly never-ending global pandemic was introduced into youth’s daily lives. The trauma of the global pandemic has certainly caused a kind of trauma in kids that can manifest itself in different ways, not unlike what typical trauma studies have shown in the past.

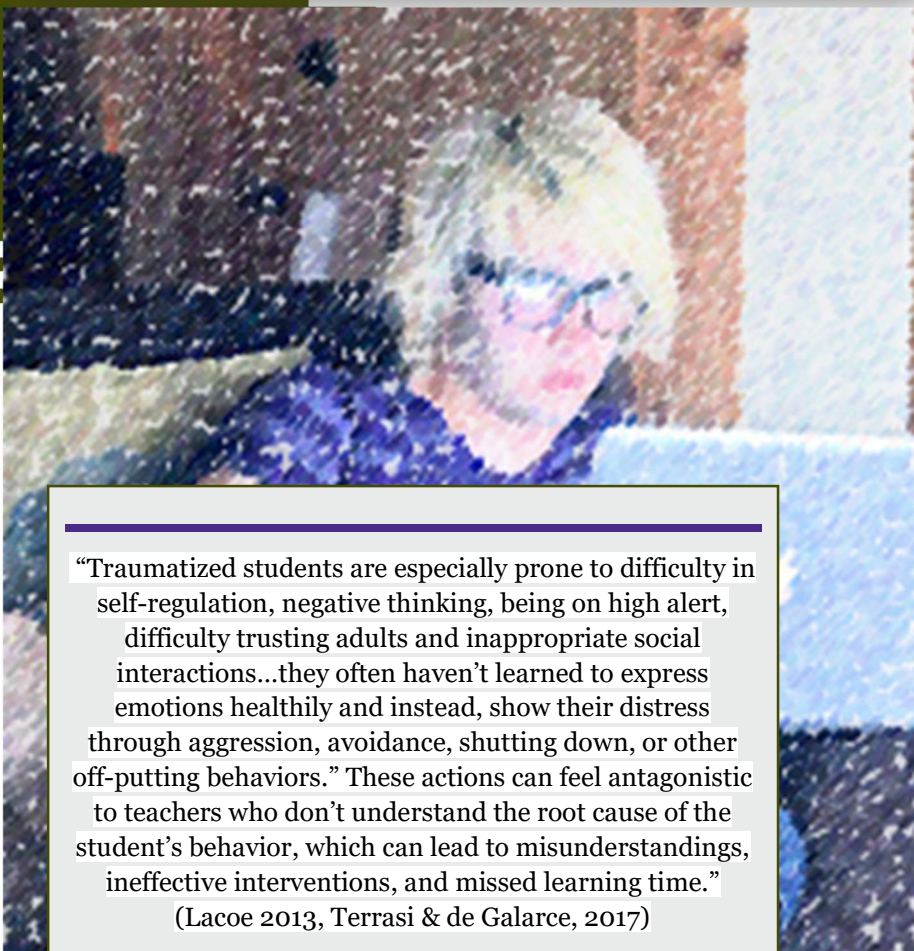
Catholic school students are not immune to trauma, and health officials are warning that with the pandemic closing down services typically open for teens (such as public counseling, after school youth centers, and youth ministry groups) there is a higher need for school teachers to be aware of the social and emotional needs of our students. According to Jessica Minahan in an article entitled *Trauma-Informed Teaching Strategies*, (Educational Leadership 2019) “small changes in the classroom can make a big difference in traumatized students.”

So what can high school teachers and education leaders be doing to support the trauma of our youth in wake of this global pandemic? According to the leaders at Echo Parenting and Education, an L.A. based consulting firm for trauma counseling, here are seven steps to promote a safe environment for students (See the box insert on the right for ideas):

Finally, don’t forget the power of prayer. Prayer is a helpful tool for reflection, and sometimes what we need most in our days, is silence and reflection.

WHAT TO DO IN A VIRTUAL CLASSROOM:

1. **Create Safety** - by guiding students who are overwhelmed to a quiet corner or allow them to decompress by taking a break (or turning off their computer screen for a set moment in time).
2. **Regulate the nervous system** - by allowing students to find a system that works for them; talk with the individual about their needs and what bring about a predictable pattern of psychological responses.
3. **Build a connected relationship** – although more difficult through virtual interactions, the number one way to regulate the nervous system is to be around the people we care about. Connect with your students beyond the classroom in more regular off-time virtual check ins and during study halls.
4. **Support development of coherent narrative**- by creating predictability through structure, routine, and presence of reliable adults to help reduce the chaos a child may feel. This is why predictable schedules are necessary – talk with your administrators if your virtual teaching schedule is all over the place currently, and how that may impact the trauma in students.
5. **Practice ‘power-with’ strategies** – one of the hallmarks of trauma is the loss of control; as adults, teachers must use power well – model a ‘power with’ relationship with children and it is the best chance of creating adults who will treat others with dignity and respect.
6. **Build social emotional and resiliency skills** – trauma robs us of time spent developing social emotional skills; learning to care for one another is the most important job we have growing up. Not the learning of content.
7. **Foster post-traumatic growth**; problem solving, planning, maintaining focus despite discomfort, self-control, and seeking support are all known to lead to post-traumatic growth and are skills we can foster in children, especially in the classroom.



“Traumatized students are especially prone to difficulty in self-regulation, negative thinking, being on high alert, difficulty trusting adults and inappropriate social interactions...they often haven’t learned to express emotions healthily and instead, show their distress through aggression, avoidance, shutting down, or other off-putting behaviors.” These actions can feel antagonistic to teachers who don’t understand the root cause of the student’s behavior, which can lead to misunderstandings, ineffective interventions, and missed learning time.”

(Lacoe 2013, Terrasi & de Galarce, 2017)

Bringing Community into our Virtual and Hybrid High Schools

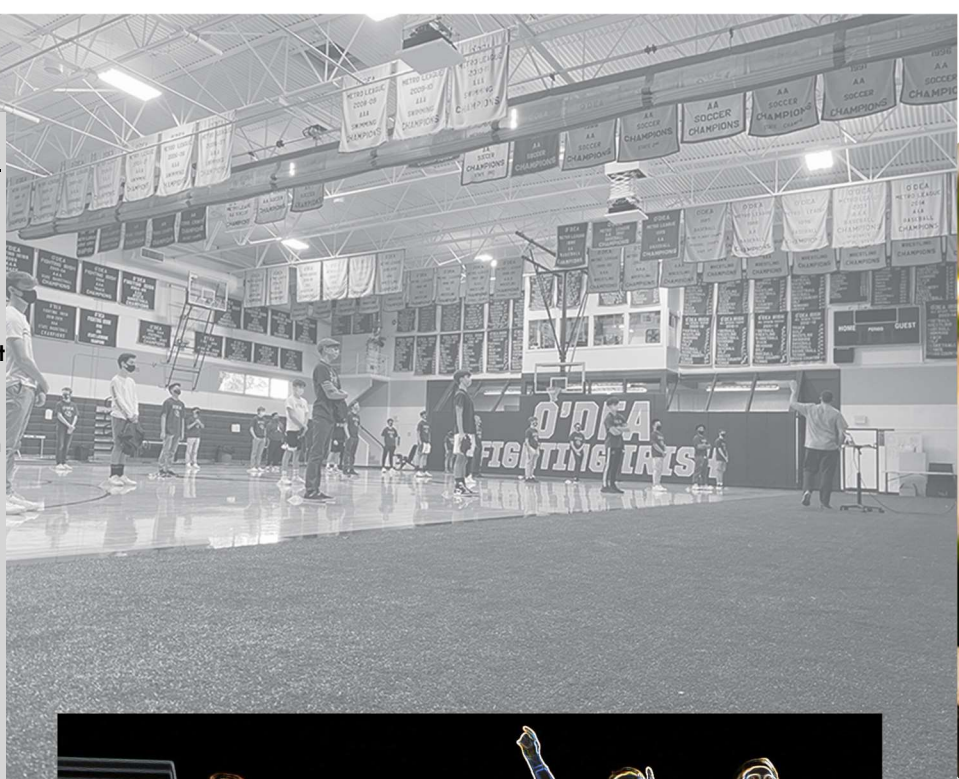
Seton Catholic – Currently with 25% of their students on campus and embracing a robust hybrid learning plan online, Seton is able to find ways for students to engage both in academic programming in person and from their homes – students who are on campus can participate in sports and extra curriculars to round out their experience.

Forest Ridge of the Sacred Heart – Girls are divided into “houses” based on colors and animals ... (someone told me the Red Foxes are the best) where students combine in small groups on campus for some community building time, separately podded to ensure safe spacing, adult supervision, and pandemic protocol adherence. Virtually they build community by wearing their spirit colors while studying and participating in academics from home!

O’Dea High School – Principal Jim Walker (known as JIMWAL to his friends) worked with his team to allow some “brotherhood days” on campus – pods of socially distanced students were able to engage in relationship building to bridge some of those social emotional needs!

Holy Names Academy – Principal Liz Swift and her administrative team as well as her campus ministry department created grade-wide opportunities to engage in spiritual retreats on campus – creating a special schedule that allows for a safe number of students to engage with each other while getting to know the campus! This is especially important for the incoming Freshman class.

In what ways is your school working towards ensuring your students have opportunities to be on campus or engaged in social emotional support? Start the conversation with your administration if you have ideas for integrating your students back on campus, even if the learning remains virtual for the near future!



HOW TO BUILD COMMUNITY IN YOUR VIRTUAL CLASSROOM?

Remember, **it's not all about content** – yes, we all have important content that must be covered, but remember, many students right now need social emotional supports more than anything else! Put a premium on taking time in your lesson, EVERYDAY to check in with students! Beyond that ...

Create Space – for all of your students to have some one-on-one time to check in with you individually once a quarter. Schedule these out – give students the option of keeping it open without an agenda, but also give students who might otherwise have anxiety about this, some questions to prepare.

Give students time to collaborate – create groups in break out rooms, or assign them time during class when they can exchange contact information and see how much they can get done in virtual groups.

Be Silly! Create themed dress days, wacky hat days, or 80s band days (with parameters, of course) – let your students show off their personalities even while at virtual school!

HOW'S YOUR YEAR GOING???

Your high school colleagues from around the Archdiocese responded honestly...

"Bellarmino is like a freight train. You just try to hold on while it goes!"

– **Samuel Booth**, Choir and Orchestra Music Teacher, Bellarmine High School

"This year has brought many challenges with it, and students and teachers alike have been tasked with adapting and finding creative ways to navigate this new way to do school. Although we all are experiencing some level of suffering during this strange time, I have great faith that there will be at least a few positives that will surface on the other side when this is all over."

– **Nicole Pierce**, Science Instructor, Archbishop Murphy High School

"My year is going as well as it can be, given the circumstances. My students and I are giving each other grace as we navigate these challenging times. All of my students are putting forth their best efforts and are working so hard. I am impressed with their dedication to learning in a remote setting."

– **Aimee O'Donnell**, English Teacher, Eastside Catholic High School

"As we navigate this new scenario of digital learning I have been inspired by the dedication and energy of the Seattle Prep teachers and staff. Everyone has made incredible efforts to create the best possible learning experience for the students. Teachers are employing a wide variety of creative technology tools to engage students and build community in the their classrooms, and for the school as a whole. The students have done an amazing job keeping a positive outlook and working hard to make this year the very best it can be!"

– **Laurie Matthews**, Science Teacher, Seattle Prep

"I am trying to be so flexible that I won't break ... and so far I have proven to be very bendy with the support of my grace-filled students and teammates."

–**Claire Breiholz**, English Teacher Seton Catholic High School

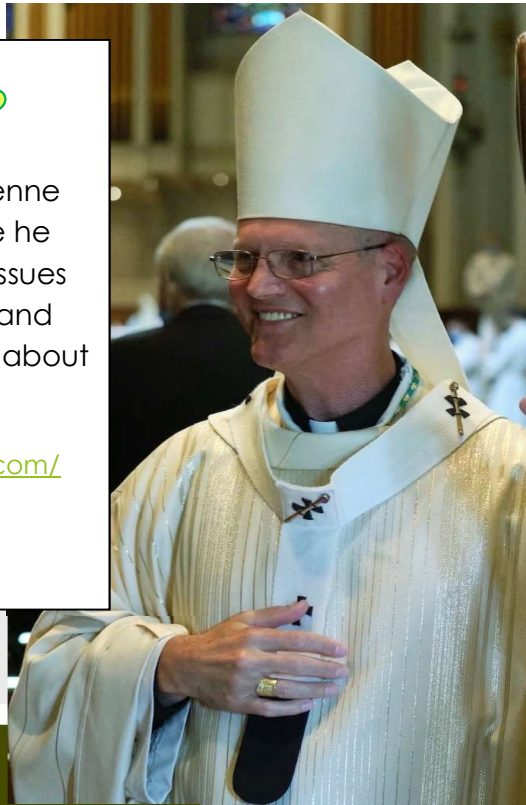
"It's been tough not being able to be with students and colleagues in person and transforming lesson plans to a digital format has been challenging, but I feel a lot more connected to my classes this year than in the the Spring. I've also really enjoyed being able to get outside every afternoon to see the athletes that I coach at Lacrosse and Cross Country practices during our open coaching period!"

– **Cait Slack**, History Teacher and Multi-Sport Coach, Seattle Prep

DID YOU KNOW?

Our very own Archbishop Entienne has his own blog online where he addresses important Catholic issues such as racism, social justice, and Pope Francis' recent discussions about civil unions? Check it out!

<https://www.archbishopentienne.com/>



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#ignitinghope

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A PRAYER FOR VOTERS

Dear Lord,

It is no less of a great responsibility for us as a voter to do our part in casting our vote for a person who possesses the God-given qualities that will keep us united and free.

We pray against the obstacles that keep us from being effective voters.

We pray we will not fall prey to the apathy that often comes over us as voters when we think that no matter who is in office, all leaders are alike and our problems are too big to be solved. Instead generate within our hearts optimism and a prayerful attitude of hope and engagement.

We pray against the tendency to focus on polls and popularity as a gauge to whether or not our vote will even count. Instead, help us to seek your guidance and cast our vote with faithfulness and determination.

Thank you God for the opportunity to live in a world with varying points of views, with love for all, and with God in our hearts. Vote.

Amen.

<https://www.prayerideas.org/voter-s-prayer-during-elections/>

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