



# **Lessons in Leadership: Maintaining a Healthy School Culture in a Divisive Political Climate**

**AISGW Spring Gathering for Division Directors  
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## Aspiring Heads 2018-19 Team

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**Driving Question:**

**Since the 2016 election, what actions have Heads of Schools (HoS) taken to maintain a healthy school culture amidst a divisive political climate?**



# Methodology

- **Developed research survey** incorporating NAIS practices and questions
- **Administered survey** to randomly selected NAIS HoS sample which included a diversity of geography, school type and HoS background
- Identified HoS interested in further discussions and **conducted follow up phone calls**
- **Compiled and analyzed data** to identify themes, trends and lessons learned



## Survey Instrument

- 15 Total Questions
  - 6 Close-ended
  - 1 Open-ended
  - 8 Demographic Indicators normed by NAIS

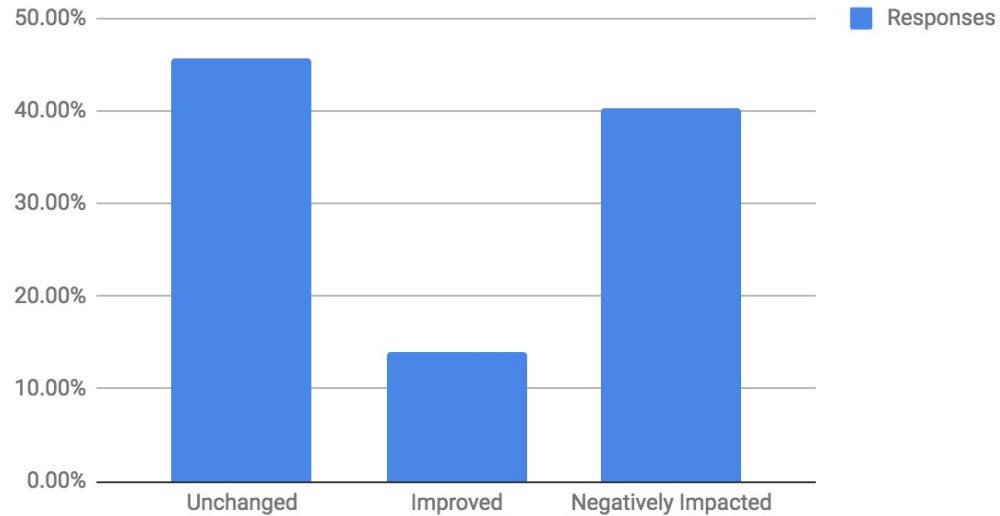
## Heads of School Respondents

- 186 respondents of ~700 surveyed (27%)
- 61 HoS indicated interest in speaking further
  - 28 actually interviewed (46%)
  - Interviews ~30 minutes

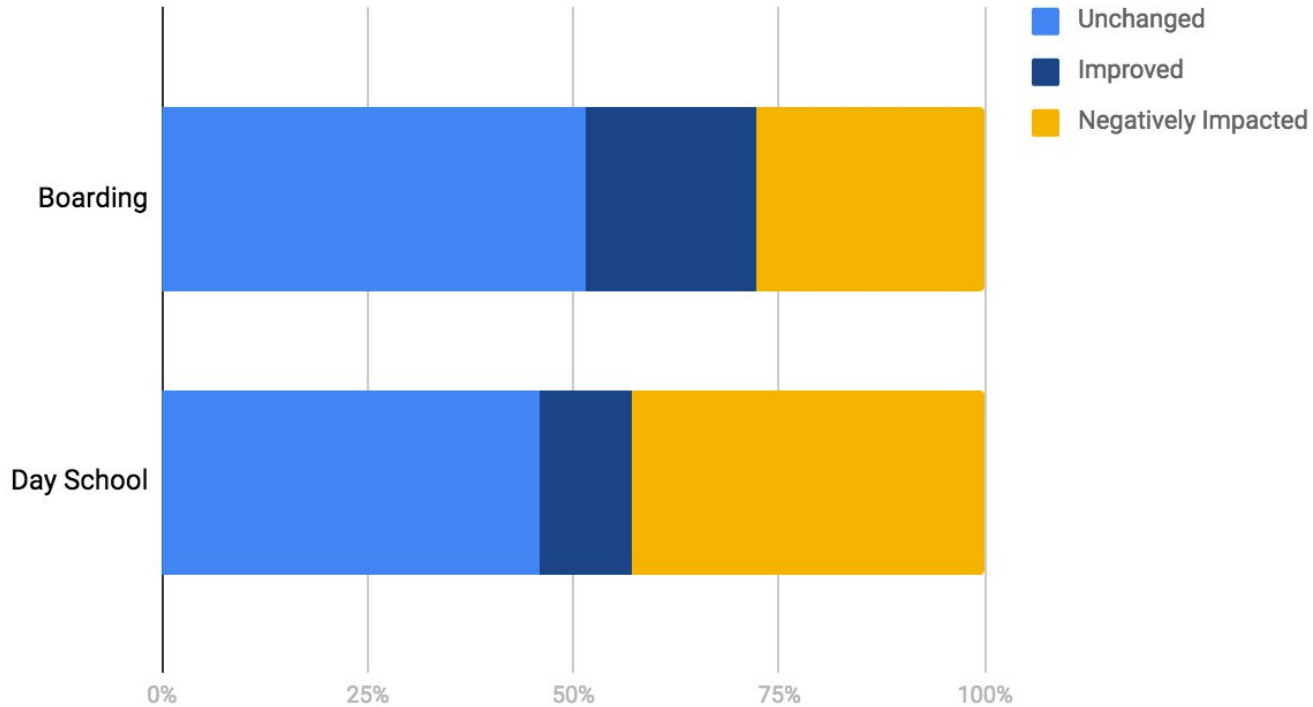


# School Climate Temperature Check

Following the 2016 election, our school climate was:

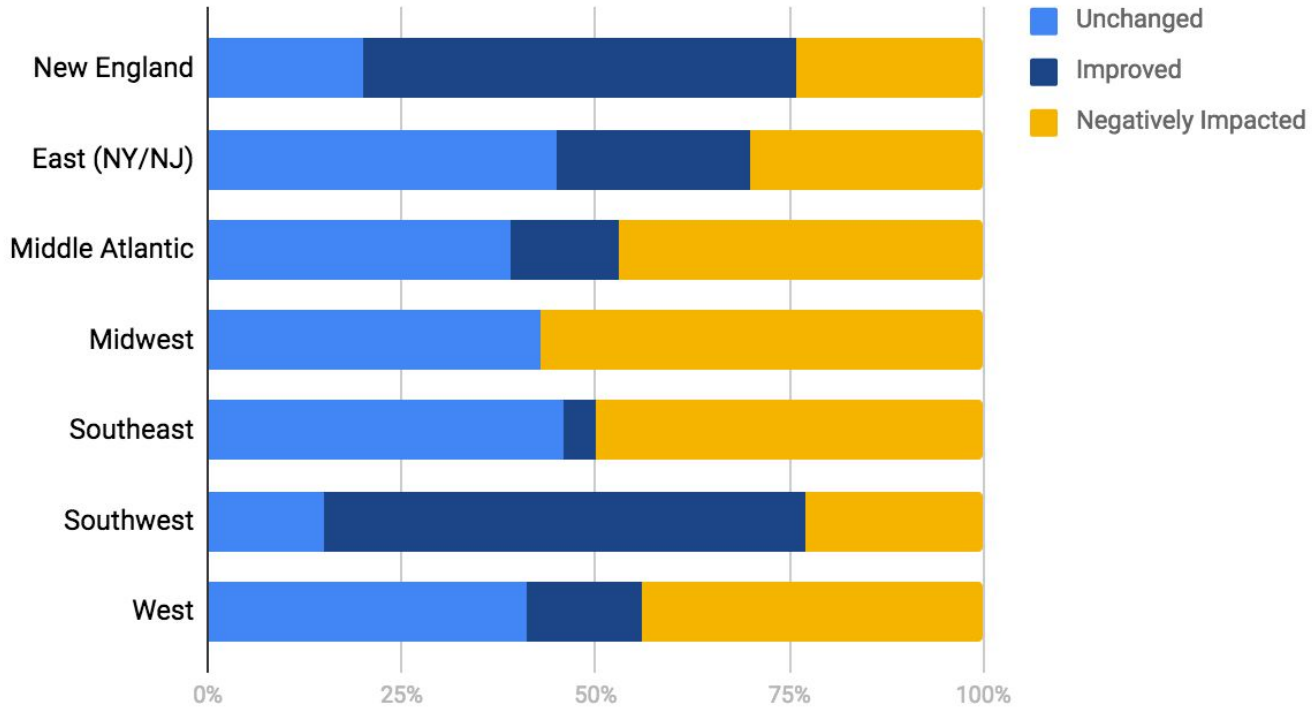


## School Climate



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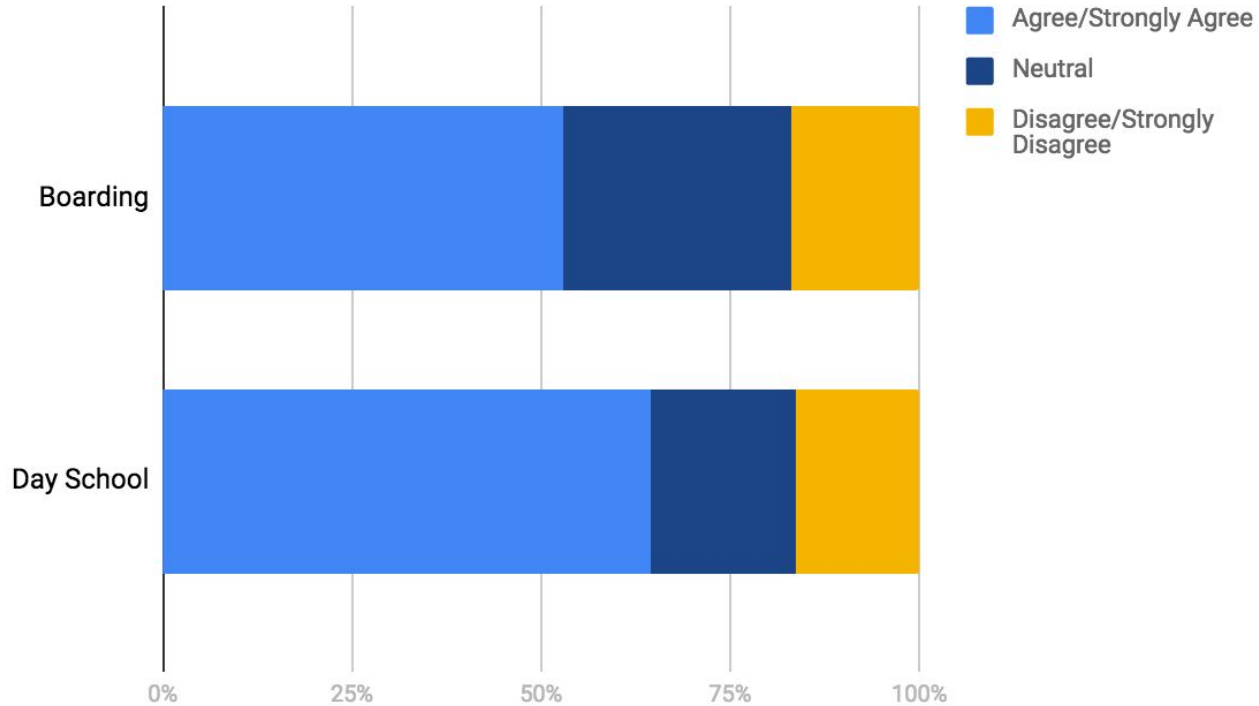




## After the 2016 election, schools experienced:

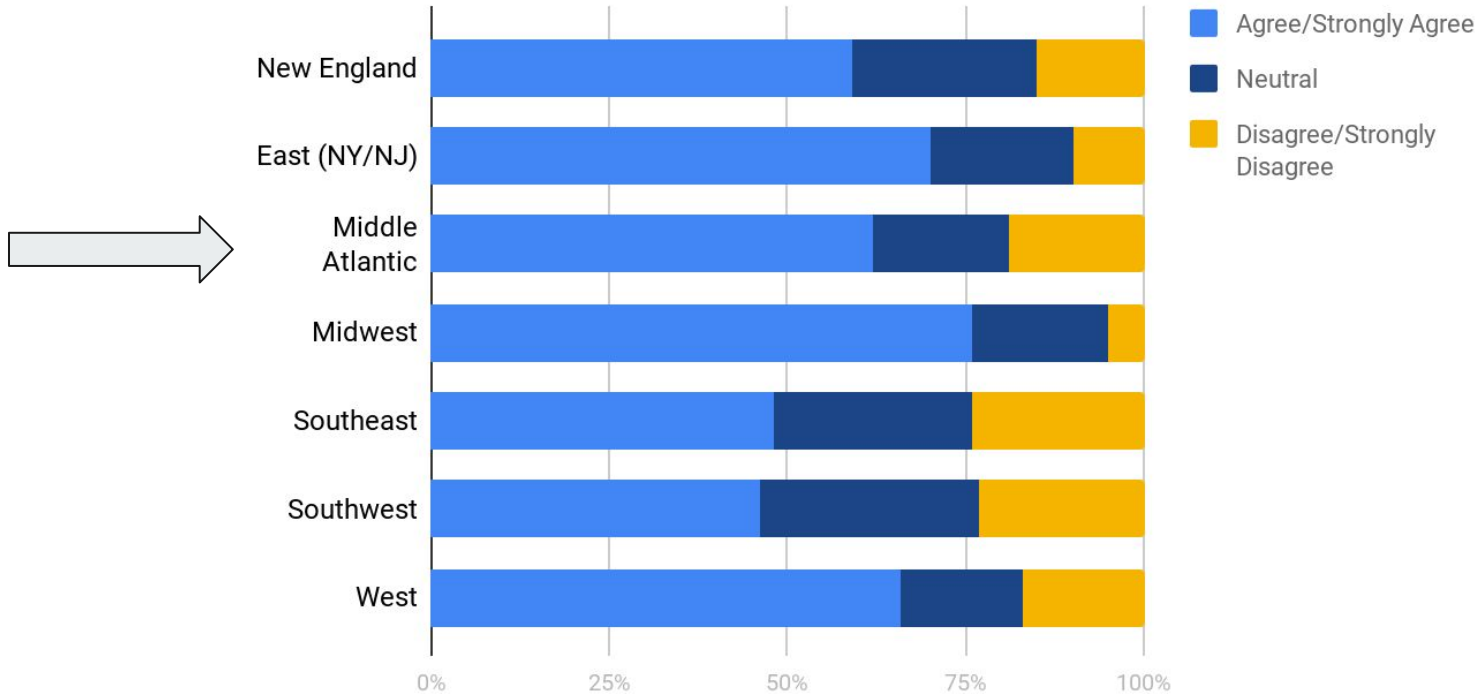
Instances of “charged political talk” on campus	61%
Marginalization of students based on their political preferences or ideals	43%
Instances of verbally aggressive and/or violence on campus	21%
Racist sentiment	18%
Anti-immigrant sentiment	8%
Participation in political demonstrations and/or activism	57%
Increased participation in political clubs or organizations on campus	36%
Pressure on the Head of School to minimize political talk in school communications (remain neutral)	45%
Pressure on the Head of School to take a stand in formal communication	38%

## Increase in Political Dialogue

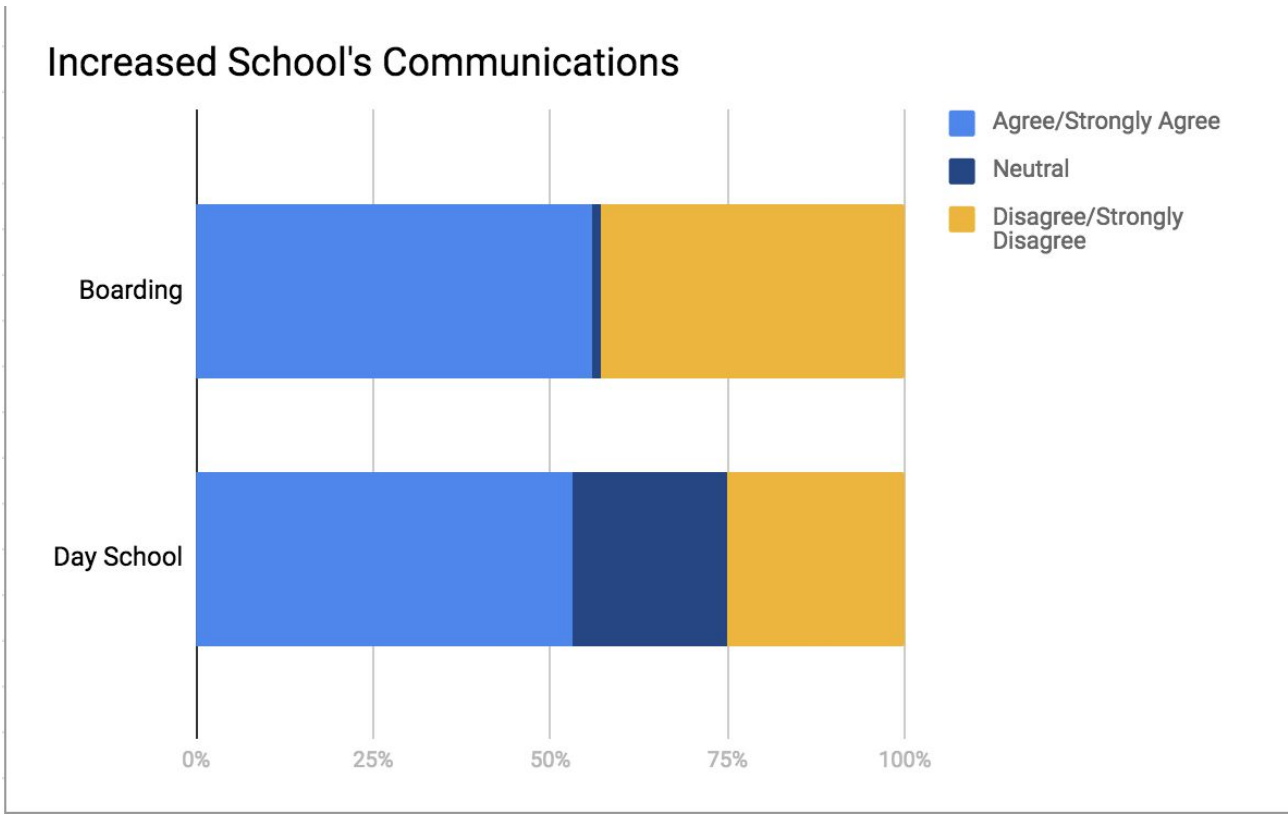


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## Political Dialogue

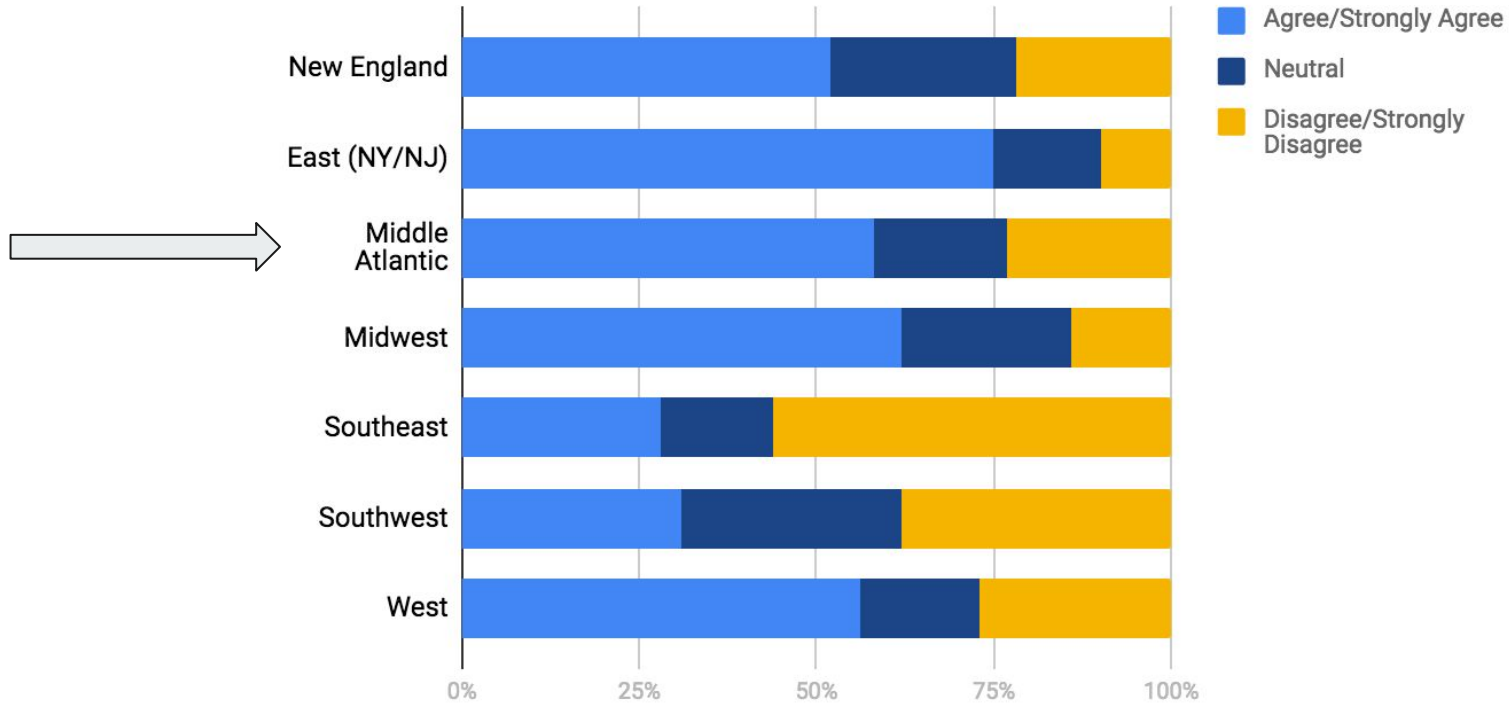


**Following the 2016 elections, our school experienced a significant increase in political dialogue on campus.**



**We have increased our school's communication in response to international and national issues since the 2016 election.**

## Increased School's Communication



**We have increased our school's communication in response to international and national issues since the 2016 election.**

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**Impact on Schools Leads  
to Practical Strategies**



## Most common actions in response to political climate (from the initial survey):

Issued <b>formal communication</b> from Head of School to constituents	64%
Implemented on-going <b>professional development</b>	53%
Developed and implemented <b>Diversity, Equity, Inclusion</b> curriculum	40%
Formed a Diversity Committee comprised of faculty and staff	26%



## Question Topics we asked 28 Heads of Schools

- Specific steps taken to address school climate
- Steps to address diversity and inclusion work
- How they measure and evaluate school culture/climate as a whole
- How communication decisions are made -- How/why/when they decide to issue communication statements to the community
- What might they do differently





# Formal and Informal Communication

## Thoughts and Themes:

- “You can’t over-communicate. You need to control the message. Just keep writing. It’s redundant, but you get the ‘Thanks for the update’ responses.” (New York, day, pK-12)
- “We made a decision not to comment on everything.” (New Jersey, boarding/day, 9-12)
- “We have an eight person team and we assign roles. One person plays the role of ‘drudge.’ He or she takes the alternative view. We do recognize that we don’t always have diverse points of view on our team, so we are always sure to ask the question, ‘What’s the alternative view on this?’”(Colorado, day, K-8)



# Formal and Informal Communication

## Takeaways:

- **Stick to the mission** - messages are better received when aligned with the school's mission
- Recognize that communication needs to **include all sides of the issue**
- Make sure you have trusted people on your team to **review communication** before sending
- Know when to over-communicate; know when to be brief and/or general



# Professional Development

## Thoughts and Themes:

- “We partnered with our biggest rival [school] to manage the costs. “ (Texas, day, pK-12)
- “We try to promote an environment where conservative speakers can authentically engage ... viewpoint diversity. Since the election, there has been some controversy around this. Some faculty members see this as allowing bigotry rather than making space for another viewpoint. We are a school playing a long game that needs to prepare kids to have thoughtful dialogue.” (DC, day, pK-12)



# Professional Development

## Takeaways:

- Build on what you are already doing
- Create a **blend of work**; mix of conferences, speakers, and readings
- Provide ample opportunity for faculty **to share PD within the whole community**
- Understand your community; ensure that **training is applicable** to all in attendance
- Closely monitor progress and efficacy, devote time and **plan follow-up**. Effective PD is not “one and done” work.



# DEI Curricula & Committees

## Thoughts and Themes:

- “The liberation of an independent school is that we can model democracy and active citizenship.” (California, pK-6, day)
- “We have a responsibility to the students in our charge to equip them to be able to go out in the world, to discern fact from fiction, and to come up with their own thoughtful and rational thinking.” (Boston, day, pK-12)
- “It’s never good to have a protocol that’s too fixed.” (CA, boarding school, 9-12)



# DEI Curricula & Committees

## Takeaways:

- Incorporate this work into **new strategic planning, reaccreditation, self-studies**
- Set aside the time and resources to do the work effectively
- Recognize that “**diversity**” and “**inclusion**” are not interchangeable
- Admissions and hiring committees need to be **proactive and deliberate** in seeking, attracting, and retaining diversity in all of its forms
- DEI work is on-going and **should be measured** for efficacy



## Discussion Questions

1. As division/curricular leaders, what strategies have you employed at your schools to maintain a healthy climate?
2. Knowing the 2020 presidential election is approaching, what might your school do differently from actions taken post-2016 election to maintain a healthy school culture?
3. How might a divisive political climate be viewed as an opportunity for schools?

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# THANK YOU! Any Questions?

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