

# A proactive plan counters tensions from civil unrest

By Terri Howard

Today's students are growing up in a culture that is more connected than ever but, at the same time, increasingly polarized. Discussion, debate, and controversy surround them during their formative years. Whether they realize it or not, concepts they are exposed to at home, in public, and in the media shape their perceptions of the world.

The rise in polarization of political and social environments has led to a resurgence of civil unrest, a blanket term for a variety of disruptive, potentially riotous events. Disorder can threaten everyone in a school setting, and administrators must keep up to date on local happenings to ensure the safety and well-being of students and staff.

Moreover, school-age children can be impacted by civil unrest happening miles, or even states, away. Civil disorder can inflame tensions across the country, and administrators and teachers need to be cognizant of this in order to effectively deal with affected individuals.

## *Civil unrest*

In seeking to minimize its effects on students, it's important to first know what civil unrest is. Be it riots, protests, or other behavior, civil unrest is a broad term used to describe unrest caused by

a group of people. Within this description, though, it can take many forms.

Some civil unrest is concentrated in localized areas or neighborhoods and affects the residents of these specific communities, usually sparked by some major event in the community. Civil unrest can also occur when groups of people deliberately target a business district, a facility, a transportation system, or an organization to impose maximum disruption. Civil unrest can grow to regional or state levels, affecting large numbers of people no matter the original cause.

## *Conflict on campus*

During times of heightened tensions and civil unrest, school leaders can't expect students to leave outside stress or anxiety at the door. Issues like racial injustice and partisan politics will affect them at home and in public, and it's likely they'll come to school attempting to process these topics. The way students process, combined with their interactions with students of differing opinions, can lead to frustration and conflict.

The most effective way to address this kind of conflict on campus is for administrators and board members to work together and plan. Thinking that it could "never happen here" leaves administrators open to being

unprepared during a crisis, exacerbating the negative effects. Civil unrest may not be common, but it still requires preparation. We recommend several key steps to help your school plan for any civil crisis.

**Model appropriate behavior** — All schools have a code of conduct, but how closely do you adhere to yours? Simply lecturing students isn't going to do the job. Negating combative or inappropriate behavior begins at the top — board members and administrators should ensure that they, along with school faculty, are setting an appropriate tone for students. Establishing a culture of tolerance and accepting a diversity of ideas can reduce conflict and argument, and school authority figures should be relied on to set this standard for their students.

**Establish conflict resolution guidelines** — School districts have processes in place for conflict resolution, but is yours a living document? Does it change to adapt to the needs of your student body and current events? How recently was it reviewed and updated? In preparation for tensions inflamed by civil unrest, board members and administrators should assess their current conflict resolution system and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses. Whether within your board or with the help of an outside crisis management

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firm, you should make sure your district is prepared to address conflicts with a variety of causes. A modern conflict resolution system must be sensitive to the unique needs, experiences, and situations of each student. Once your conflict resolution system is up to date, make sure to rehearse and drill it to look for elements that still need fixing. Talking through scenarios around a boardroom table or even recruiting students from the theater or drama program to enact a real-life scenario can help illuminate the parts of your conflict resolution plan that still need tweaking.

**Coordinate communication efforts** — Never wait until civil unrest is at your doorstep to establish how

the district will communicate to faculty, students, and parents in the event of a crisis. Safety is the first priority, and board members should work with administration and staff to prepare a communications strategy. Do you need to know about curfews or street closings? Respond to external requests for information? Publicize school closings? Email and telephone can be effective channels to utilize during a crisis, but don't neglect the power of the media and social media. Being aware of what you'll say and how you'll say it before you're on the spot will lead to clearer and more effective communications and a safer campus.

**Stay aware** — Remember that “it could never happen here” is a thought

that will only harm your crisis planning and worsen safety concerns in the face of real civil unrest. While we may not like thinking about it happening on our school grounds or campus, we must prepare for the possibility. School district leaders who keep their finger on the community pulse will be better informed, better prepared, and ready to respond to potential crises, allowing them to remain resilient in the face of threats to, or conflicts on, school property. This also ensures your focus remains on your mission of providing a quality education to students in a safe environment.

Before the school year gets away from you, take some time to gather your crisis team together to review your plan, and as you begin working on the 2018-19 budget, consider allocating funds to keep your crisis plan current. As the saying goes, “It's better to be safe than sorry.”

*Editor's note*

The discussion of civil unrest presents the opportunity for school boards to review their policies to ensure there is a solid framework for dealing with issues arising on school property. Crisis plans and procedures for action by district administrators, including communicating with the public, can be part of board administrative procedures.

*For more information*

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