

Fairness Messaging for Controversial Ideologies and Practices in K-12 Education

*To transform children into “social justice” advocates, proponents of controversial ideologies (social-emotional learning, gender fluidity, race essentialism) use compassion appeals to justify converting classrooms into political activism training grounds, labeling opponents uncaring bigots. To counter this smear and attract “persuadables,” remember that **people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care**. Therefore, we must fight for those in our education system – students, teachers, administrators – who’ve been sidetracked from education’s goal: to help students reach their academic potential by fostering critical thinking and reasoning skills. This messaging provides examples of how to respond to common false allegations, applying the Six Powers of Persuasion illustrated in the graphic below. Put these arguments into your own words and begin persuading others!*

ALLEGATION: To assure inclusivity, first graders can and should know about and talk about pronouns and gender identity!

COMMON GROUND: Teachers, among the most influential figures in a child’s life, play a pivotal role in fostering inclusivity and self-worth. By recognizing and accommodating diverse learning abilities, they maintain positive learning environments with boundaries that make their world understandable. Having earned the trust of impressionable children, teachers guide them toward realizing their academic potential. That’s why I worry about disrupting this trusted relationship, potentially making their world less understandable by teaching students concepts that contradict their biological makeup. This could lead to identity confusion and anxiety, which are already at alarming levels in our youth. It is crucial that we prioritize the well-being of our children and protect them from such challenges.

CLARIFYING QUESTIONS: Considering the alarming decline in youth mental health, of what practical benefit is it for young students to think about gender identity? Why intentionally confuse children by introducing them to language and communication styles that diverge from their family’s at-home practices? Considering how the pandemic exacerbated student under-performance and mental health, why do school systems persist in diverting scarce educational dollars into non-academic programming, including controversial ideologies that politicize the classroom? Why allow the instruction of concepts that lead to confusion and pressure students to abandon their family’s beliefs and values?

PIVOT TO PEOPLE-FOCUSED/FAIRNESS AND COMPASSION-FRAMED MESSAGES: Teaching students ideas that differ from their family’s beliefs is unfair to both them and their parents. Not only does it undermine their parents’ right to make decisions about their kids’ education, it causes kids confusion and anxiety for fear of misspeaking, at home and at school. Pitting children against their parents is the opposite of what our education system should be doing! True inclusion requires a focus not on superficial things like pronouns, but on treating each person with kindness and consideration, and on allowing each other grace to learn, forgiveness to make mistakes, and patience to grow.

Pronouns that refer to gender identity rather than biological sex are based on a controversial and complicated political ideology that many parents find objectionable. While Chinese third graders are learning calculus concepts, ours aren’t reading or doing math at grade level, with vulnerable at-risk students suffering the most. Therefore, schools should keep life simpler – for teachers, parents, and young students – by refraining from promoting perplexing and ambiguous ideas that are difficult for kids to comprehend, causing anxiety and depression. It is our responsibility to safeguard our children.

ALLEGATION: LGBTQIA+ students are at a higher risk for suicidal thoughts and behavior. Without a social-emotional learning program, how will you assure that this population feels safe in their learning environment?

COMMON GROUND: I agree, schools must ensure that all students feel welcome and accepted, enabling them to focus on learning the academic skills they need to flourish in their lives. Every student has inherent worth and dignity, and it is crucial to remind them to treat others with the same respect with which they would want to be treated. It's true that teens are suffering a mental health crisis of epic proportions as evidenced by the explosion of suicide rates among 10–24-year-olds. That's why children experiencing psychological distress deserve therapeutic support from trained and licensed mental health professionals. Educators who undergo years of schooling to become experts in what they teach should not be expected to become unlicensed therapists, further jeopardizing a child's wellbeing.

CLARIFYING QUESTIONS: Given the correlation between increasing rates of suicidal ideation among gender non-conforming students and the introduction of controversial race and gender concepts in the classroom, shouldn't we examine whether teaching these concepts has contributed to the teen mental health crisis? Considering the crisis, shouldn't we stop exposing students to sexually explicit concepts that confuse and alarm them? If our objective is to create a safe learning environment, why not teach kids to be compassionate and accepting of those who are different, and to live by the Golden Rule?

PIVOT TO PEOPLE-FOCUSED/FAIRNESS AND COMPASSION-FRAMED MESSAGES: Most children leave home for school every morning feeling safe and loved. However, once at school, exposure to beliefs and values contrary to their parents' is unsettling. This conflict contributes to the growing anxiety among youth, leading to dangerous behaviors including cutting, PTSD, personality disorders, and suicide. I'm worried about kids with autism, those from dysfunctional families, and those with various mental health issues that require careful examination before judgment is made. They also need our protection.

While claiming certain identities are linked to a higher incidence of mental illness and suicidal thoughts, the underlying reasons for these associations remain unclear. Each student is a unique individual with distinct circumstances. They require and deserve tailored interventions that cater to their individual mental distress. However, if students face bullying due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or other protected group membership, disciplinary measures must be implemented. Bullying is not tolerated. Furthermore, it is crucial to inform the parents of bullied children in order to alleviate their child's social, physical, and mental distress. Parents are, after all, the primary caregivers and the best advocates for their child's wellbeing.

We should foster an academic environment where gender non-conforming children can live their lives without any pressure, whether from bullies or influencers who encourage them to alter their bodies and their minds. We must safeguard all students by maintaining appropriate boundaries for impressionable children who are neither emotionally nor developmentally mature enough to be exposed to controversial ideas and practices that may confuse and alarm them. Schools must recognize that parents have the sole right and responsibility to decide whether, when, and how to introduce their children to sensitive topics.

SIX POWERS OF PERSUASION

