

OP-ED: ARE OUR STUDENTS GETTING THE WRONG MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE?

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What message are we delivering to New Jersey's kids when some candidates for the nation's highest office act like sneering schoolyard bullies?



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Name calling ... inappropriate references to body parts ... interrupting ... mocking physical challenges ... throwing insults ... lying.

No, this isn't an out-of-control playground or children left to run amok. Rather, it's the example being set by some candidates currently aspiring to the office of President of the United States.

And it's extremely disconcerting that we need to address such behavior.

Yet, in the America of 2016, this is where we are and what we've become. Instead of discussing policy, leadership philosophy, and personal beliefs, some candidates are more focused on hurling invectives, anger, and derision. Previous elections – including some of our most recent – were certainly hard-fought and contentious. But the current 'race to the bottom' is eye-poppingly unsettling, and has the capacity to alienate an entire generation of young voters.

And the candidates aren't alone in their negative behavior. As we know, misbehaving is often fueled by attention from others, so the incessant coverage by our national and local media outlets certainly plays a role. A cursory glance at any evening newscast or online article reveals significant attention being paid to the latest insult or challenge from one candidate to another. The media's enthusiasm for the sharing of negativity enhances the acrimonious atmosphere, pushing the electorate further toward cynicism. Even more disturbingly, it breeds distrust in the American electoral process.

In his seminal work, "The Students Are Watching," Ted Sizer reminds us that students learn about their teachers by observing them day in and day out. An understanding of rules and expectations is generated more by example than by the spoken word alone. Educators who are kind, treat students well, and have high expectations elevate their profession and bring the best out of their classes. But those who are derisive, have minimal dedication, and appear to not even like children are dismissed by their students – and set back the profession.

This same dynamic is now being played out on the national stage, not only in front of the American public, but the entire world. Sadly, an unacceptable message is being sent about what Americans are like, and what we believe is right. This being the case, we implore our political candidates to set an example for students and demonstrate what this process – which we've taken such pride in for so long – should actually look like. The same applies to the media, which has been embracing the most salacious behavior as a means of capturing as many viewers and readers as possible. Highlighting the toxic behavior is poisonous to our students' attitudes. Further, we also call on the electorate - a desire for action does not excuse conduct that is unsavory or rude.

Throughout Bergen County, our schools continue stressing the importance of civic engagement, and strive to balance out the current vitriol with positive activities reinforcing the importance of knowledgeable citizenship.

For example, the Ridgefield Park Public Schools, working in conjunction with their local Elks chapter, offers an Elks Youth Day. Students assume the role of community leaders for an afternoon, learn about their involvement in the political process, and have the importance of giving back to the community impressed upon them. Local and state dignitaries join with the students for a recognition dinner where the need for civic engagement, openness to the ideas of others, and the ideals of a democratic society are emphasized. There isn't an insult or negative comment to be heard.

Other examples include mock elections, debates, and research into candidates' positions and policies. Along with these educational activities, our districts certainly don't engage or tolerate poisonous language, juvenile taunts, and those "race to the bottom" tactics that seek to tear down others.

Working in conjunction with its mayor and council, the Maywood Public Schools arranges each November for eighth-grade students to attend a town council meeting. The council opens the meeting with general agenda business and then allows the students to ask questions and engage in dialogue in the open meeting format with the council for about 45 minutes. This along with the Junior Council Program – in which the youth of Maywood assume shadow positions with the council – goes a long way in opening their eyes to government at work. Civic engagement, the value of recognizing the opinions of others, and our shared connection in a democracy are all emphasized for our students.

Along with in-district activities, the superintendents of Bergen County continue to do their best to set examples for what civic engagement, public participation, and consistent leadership looks like. We take seriously our obligation to our communities and to setting favorable examples for our students. We are committed to modeling how a true leader behaves, and we implore those aspiring to the highest office in the land to do the same – to act in a manner that is truly presidential.

The reason for this comes down to a simple fact: Our children are watching.

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