

STRATEGIES FOR EDUCATORS

Teachers and educators are well placed to recognize early warning signs of exposure to extremist ideas and build resilience to disinformation and propaganda. School staff—including teachers, cafeteria workers, custodial staff, school counselors and other administrators—are often the first adults to witness hateful incidents like the use of slurs, racist and misogynistic symbols, or hallway and recess violence. Here are some strategies that will help school policy and classroom practice be more responsive to the victims of hate while interrupting youth radicalization.

Watch for potentially harmful, biased, or discriminatory dialogue, as well as bullying among classmates. Listen to what children say to each other about how they spend time and who they talk to online. Some of the warning signs of extremist radicalization are similar to signs of other kinds of exploitation, trauma, or potential abuse. Students experiences outside of class are not always clear, but changes in behavior and affect, relationships with peers, and emotional well-being may be signs that something is wrong.

Familiarize yourself with modern hate symbols, including “edgy” memes and humor. Keep an eye on unusual symbols, emoji, avatars, flags, or colors that are being used in new or unexpected ways—and ask students what they mean. Approach conversations with curiosity rather than suspicion and ask students to explain youth culture and the meaning of different symbols.

Don't ignore problematic statements or behavior. Teachers may feel caught off guard and be uncertain about the right response when a student says something harmful or discriminatory. But silence is often interpreted as indifference. Be careful to confront problematic statements and behavior without ridicule or shame, and without denigrating the student. Shame can drive youth further into online communities that convert hurt feelings into a sense of betrayal or anger.

Encourage dialogue and work with students to create guidelines about how to have respectful, open conversation about difficult topics. Remind students that they can constructively disagree, and model ways to ensure a tone of respect, safety, and open dialogue to help students to learn and engage on complicated issues.

Question sources of news and information. Teach students how to determine whether information or news they read online is valid or not. Establish clear guidelines for what constitutes an acceptable source of information for school projects and reports. Teach students how to determine potential bias in media sources or whether an article has gone through academic peer-review. School librarians can be excellent partners in improving media literacy and building resilience to misinformation and disinformation.



It is far easier to prevent radicalization than to de-radicalize or disengage someone.

Create and maintain open engagement with parents and parent-teacher advisory committees. Encourage transparency of school actions against hate and extremism. Although white supremacist extremism has been identified as the most lethal terror-related threat against civilians in the U.S., there are many kinds of hate that exist across the spectrum—including antisemitism, anti-Asian violence, and misogynistic violence. All families need communication and support, including those whose children are at risk for radicalization, and those who are potential targets of hate incidents.

Support your colleagues and reach out for help when you need it, too. Teachers depend on support from school administrators to take a clear stand against extremism and violence. School policies should clearly communicate community standards and school values with students in order to be clear that hate, harassment, bias, and bullying will not be tolerated. School leaders can ensure proper support for victims and integration of support with school social workers, extracurricular leaders, and sports team coaches.

Engage with real world events. Current events in the world, the community, or the school can offer a chance to have critical conversations. Students inevitably absorb online chatter about current events. From the Movement for Black Lives and protests against systemic police brutality, to the far-right insurrection at the Capitol on January 6th, classroom conversations are a critical part of contextualizing real world events. Develop an understanding of what students have already heard or read and give them a chance to hear different perspectives from peers and teachers.

Follow up. Check in with students, parents, and colleagues about red flags. Speak to students after class, during break times, or after school when students might feel more comfortable sharing their views than in front of peers. Aim to learn more about what is going on with the student while avoiding calling them out publicly. Foreground support for survivors/victims.

Don't wait to get started. It is far easier to prevent people from becoming radicalized in the first place than it is to deradicalize or disengage someone from extremist groups and ideas. Be clear about your school's and community's values, and what behaviors will and won't be tolerated. Teachers, educators, and school leaders can help build engaging conversations about hate and bias that make all students feel supported.