

A SEASON OF CHALLENGE

By Joe Cavanaugh

As we work with schools throughout the country, we start our Respect Retreat telling a room of hundreds of 9th graders that our goal is NOT to make them friends. Our goal is to show them they don't have to be enemies—to challenge them to treat each other with dignity and respect, even if they would never sit at the same lunch table.

How do we treat each other? Have we come to a place where winning a soccer game—or an argument—or an election—has become so important that we cannot see our competitors as fellow students or citizens, so instead we only see them as enemies?

Civility and respect are intricately woven together. They cannot be separated. They are the hallmarks for a safe and healthy school environment. When we demonize another, we enable ourselves to do anything and say anything to defeat them. A true sign of character is embracing the idea that all people have value and deserve to be treated with dignity. For our schools to be safe and for bullying to end, we need to insist on and expect that from our children.

I await the upcoming elections with a nagging sense of dread. The predicted lack of civil discourse only hastens the downward spiral of civility and goodness in our community and our nation. My concern is the continued erosion of civility only increases the acceptance of disrespect and incivility in school hallways, lunchrooms, and classrooms—and the challenge before all of us becomes that much more difficult.

The season is ripe with challenge. In schools, we challenge young people to embrace the character traits of respect, and so, too, civility. In our community, we as adults need to challenge ourselves, and each other, to model the same—whether at school, the neighborhood park, or at work. Perhaps the season is also ripe to challenge and insist that those running for office do the same. To hold each of us to the same standard as we do our children.

I have decided not to vote for any candidate who refuses to model respectful and civil discourse with their opponents even if they happen to represent political views that I embrace. Please join all of us at Youth Frontiers in challenging every young person, and every adult, to embrace the values of respect and civility.

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