



FOUNDATION  
AGAINST  
INTOLERANCE  
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FAIR ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

**A Step-by-Step Guide  
For Teachers**

## **Race-Essentialism, Activism, and Illiberalism in Schools: A Step-by-Step Guide for Teachers**

You are an educator. You love teaching — the thrill of discovery, the controlled chaos of a classroom brimming with energy. Of course, those are the good days; but even on less-than-good days, teaching can be exhilarating, exhausting, and fulfilling, all at the same time.

But schools have changed. Now, in hallways, offices and meetings, you constantly hear the words “racist” or “privilege” or “lived experience” or “colonizer.” Maybe you’ve had to revamp your curriculum. Maybe you’ve had to throw away your favorite lessons because they don’t conform to your school’s new race-essentialism. Maybe you’ve had to publicly acknowledge your racial stress or your complicity in racial supremacy or been asked to publicly declare your pronouns. Whether you teach at a public school or private school, these changes have been accelerating, and you might be wondering if there is anything you can do.

### **FAIR Educators Alliance**

Consider joining the **FAIR Educators Alliance**. The Educators Alliance is a supportive group of teachers from across the country who meet to share resources and strategies for teaching in schools that embrace race-essentialism and other illiberal orthodoxies. To join the Educators Alliance, please reach out to [educators@fairforall.org](mailto:educators@fairforall.org).

In addition, here are some steps you can take to help stem and even turn the tide at your school.

### **Step 1: Be informed.**

Make sure you understand what is happening. Become familiar with the issues by reading an overview [here](#). Don’t be lulled by the benign language of “social justice” and “community-building.” Make sure you understand that these labels don’t actually describe what is happening. Understand that the illiberal movement is grounded in a specific kind of educational philosophy or pedagogy -- a word educators love to throw around -- namely, critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy, which is based on post-modernist and Marxist theories, asserts that educators should use the classroom to start a revolution against the world's power hierarchies and systems of oppression. (You can read about the critical theorist Paolo Freire and the history and application of his Marxist ideas [here](#).) This radical idea of education stands in opposition to the pro-human liberal values of civil liberties, equal protection, and fairness.

Understanding, defining, and naming critical pedagogy as the ideological force behind your school's illiberalism should be your first step toward empowering yourself and others to speak truthfully about what is happening.

### **Step 2: Inform others.**

Once you understand and see clearly what is happening, inform others. Start conversations with colleagues, parents, and friends. In light of the current climate of orthodoxy, these conversations can be incredibly difficult to begin, so starting these conversations takes moral courage. But the more you can inform others, the more they can begin to see the truth of what is happening, and there is power in numbers.

Begin with simple, light-hearted openers that can lead to the sharing of pro-human values. Here are some conversation-starters:

- I don't know about all this (training, material, programming).
- I feel like the focus on group identity is kind of backward. Didn't the civil rights movement try to end this way of thinking?
- I wonder if educators really should be activists. (This is a question that has been hotly debated for decades.) Does everyone really just agree now?
- This (training, material, programming) reminds me of that book by Paolo Freire. Have you heard of him? Did you ever have to read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*?
- Have you heard of [FAIR, the Foundation Against Intolerance and Racism](#)? They're a group of thinkers and writers of all political persuasions who are working to promote civil liberties by focusing on the values of fairness, understanding, and humanity.

### **Step 3: Speak up. Be honest in public.**

You're sitting in a faculty meeting, and everyone agrees (or seems to agree) on the latest race-essentialist programming. Do you nod along in agreement? Or should you speak up? The answer, of course, depends on your circumstances and your tolerance for risk. Are you a public school teacher or a private school teacher? What is the culture in your school district? What is the culture among families in your school?

For all educators, the First Amendment protects your right to free speech. You can not go to jail for things you say (with some well-known carve outs that don't apply here). But that does not mean you won't face consequences for speaking up.

Here are some ways to be honest in public about the truth of illiberalism, while also mitigating your risks.

- Ask a question. You might ask for clarification on how a particular program will have the desired effect. You might ask for a definition of the terms they're using, especially when they're being used in a way to obfuscate or twist an idea to fit their ideology. You might also ask by what metrics for success these programs will be measured, given that the latest research findings on the effectiveness of anti-bias programs are decidedly mixed.
- Wonder out loud about whether anyone -- hypothetically speaking-- disagrees with this stuff. Wonder if there anyone who is skeptical, or closeted, so to speak. How big, really, is that closet? Comments like these might garner chuckles, or they might invite some proverbial daggers. But watch carefully for how those around you react. You might find a peer by speaking up publicly. (See Step 5.)
- Offer some alternative viewpoints of pro-human values. Ask if anyone has heard of the work of John McWhorter, Glenn Loury, and others who oppose race-essentialism in education. Simply mentioning these names in public also might help some closeted teachers see that they are not alone. (See Step 5).
- Point out the reductive and essentialist thinking that views individuals as representations of a group based on skin color or other immutable traits. Insist on your right to your own individual viewpoint. (This is no easy task in a room filled with people ready to point out your privilege or fragility.) Don't let anyone tell you what you believe, or should believe, because of the color of your skin. Recall that the civil

rights movement fought against racist categorizing, and won. Racial classification was wrong then, and it is wrong now.

#### **Step 4: Choose silence as a form of conscientious objection**

What if you just can't bring yourself to speak out publicly? Can silence be enough?

Yes! You do not have to say anything you don't believe. No one can compel you to speak, and you don't have to explain your reasons for remaining silent.

Consider silence as a moral or conscientious objection. You might also decide that you want to assert your silence. If someone calls you out for your silence, you might simply offer the words: "I prefer not to speak" or "I'm going to stay silent here." One teacher reports that, in a faculty meeting, she stated simply, "I am not comfortable sharing my views." That teacher's simple statement disrupted the illusion of uniformity, which then led to other teachers finding her and forming connections. (See Step 5.)

Regardless of your choice of whether to speak up or remain silent, keep in mind that there is a real benefit to living your values. Teachers who have taken public steps like these report the deep satisfaction of knowing that they have acted with moral courage and that they may have given comfort or inspiration to others.

#### **Step 5: Find a peer or ally. Connect with FAIR Educators Alliance.**

Living in the closet with your true opinions can be lonely, but you are not alone. Find peers and allies at the [FAIR Educators Alliance](#), which brings together educators from all levels to share experiences and concerns and to work on developing resources that can support teachers, community members, and FAIR chapters. Other organizations like [Heterodox Academy](#), [The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education \(FIRE\)](#), and [Braver Angels](#) can also provide resources and opportunities to connect, which will help you build more moral courage to bring back to your own school.

Also consider finding a peer or ally among your own colleagues. Email an article (or essay or podcast or video) to a colleague. You don't have to say much; you can just offer it as "food for thought." You might hear only crickets in response, but you might also be surprised to find someone who is receptive or similarly skeptical of the orthodoxy.

## **Step 6: Form alliances within your school.**

**Teacher alliances.** An alliance of like-minded colleagues might be casual, as in simply sharing information and support. Or you might decide to take action. The kinds of action you take will depend on whether you teach in a public or private setting, as well as your risk tolerance.

In private schools, any teacher action that has a whiff of disagreement with official policy can be risky due to the school-created contracts and the absence of union protection. Some private schools do, however, try to provide some voice for teachers, whether it's a seat on the board of trustees or through a formal liaison to the administration. Consider connecting with those teachers who have amplified voices. If there is none, consider whether you might be able to garner support among colleagues to petition for some kind of collective representation or formal channel for airing concerns.

Public school teachers should start by informing themselves of their rights, both under Title VI (which protects civil rights in education for districts that receive federal funds) and your own contract. Reach out to your union representatives to discuss formal or informal actions you might take. You might also consider getting in touch with school board members or others active in the district. For those with tenure, you might write an article in the local paper to express concern about a policy that is harmful to student learning or the community.

**Teacher-parent alliances.** Whether you're a private or public school teacher, consider parents as possible allies. Parents generally care about the teachers and their experiences, and they're generally in the dark about what goes on inside the school and eager to learn more of what happens behind closed doors.

On back-to-school night, you might introduce yourself as both a teacher and a lifelong learner who values a marketplace of ideas and civil discourse as part of education. You might have parents fill out a quick questionnaire to gauge their expectations for the class and their attitudes toward an educational environment that welcomes viewpoint diversity. These responses could be useful later when looking for potential allies.

An alliance of teachers and parents could leverage teachers' inside knowledge with the power of parents, whose dollars fund the school, to make a real difference. Schools will

have a much harder time ignoring alternative views that challenge the orthodoxy if parents and teachers are aligned.

### **Step 7: Stay neutral and non-partisan**

To be a pro-human educator, it's important to remain neutral and focused on values like freedom of expression and freedom of thought. When teaching or working with colleagues, openly stand for reason, evidence, equality, rigorous debate, multiple viewpoints, and respect and dignity for all individuals, regardless of their cultural identifiers or political viewpoints.

True liberalism is neither conservative nor progressive. It is simply the idea that every single person should be treated fairly and equally. Don't get pulled into partisan politics.

### **Step 8: Model and promote pro-human values in your own classroom**

Cultivate a school and classroom culture that promotes constructive, pro-human values. Here are some ideas:

- Offer a viewpoint diversity workshop at your school, for teachers or for students or both. You could use the many different online resources from FAIR, FIRE, Heterodox Academy, Moral Courage Project, and Open Mind Platform to encourage and cultivate healthy discourse.
- Put up posters in your classroom like "[Think Different](#)" or "[Question Authority](#)" or "[Think for Yourself](#)." Even if you never utter a word to your students, your students will be staring at and, hopefully, internalizing the values of reason, equality, and viewpoint diversity. Never underestimate the lasting effect of classroom posters.
- Include images or symbols of free speech, equality, and fairness, such as the [Statue of Liberty](#) or the American flag. (You don't have to be of any particular political persuasion to recognize that the flag -- for all of its baggage -- is also a symbol of freedom of speech and thought.) You don't have to explain yourself. You don't have to use a big flag or even a fabric flag. You could simply print out and post an image of the [flag by Jasper Johns](#) -- it's art!

- Identify students who seem skeptical or questioning and encourage them to start a chapter of [FAIR in Schools](#). These high school clubs allow students to find a place to explore different perspectives and understand other ways of thinking.
- Find out what newspapers and magazines your school library subscribes to. Be sure that there is an alternative to *The New York Times*, which, as the “newspaper of record,” is [not what it once was](#). Get a subscription to other newspapers and journals. The *Wall Street Journal* offers discount subscriptions for schools and students. Introduce websites like [the Flip Side](#) or [Ground News](#) that will help your students recognize the importance of alternative viewpoints.
- Introduce yourself to students as a lifelong learner, and give them open and genuine invitations toward disagreement. Explain that you love disagreements because they help you learn. Insist on respectful, civil discourse, which will provide the classroom with a kind of guardrail, but then let the discussions flow.
- Model curiosity, inquiry, and reason, and embrace multiple viewpoints. Cultivate a culture of ideas. When everyone agrees (or seems to agree), suggest that you suspect there might be another viewpoint. Ask the question hypothetically -- what would someone who disagrees say?
- Encourage authentic questioning. Ask students to keep a journal that tracks: Did you ask a good question today? What was the question? Consider this essay on [the art of asking questions](#) for why and how this approach is essential to open thinking and education. Empower students to ask questions to which there might not even be answers. The idea is to tap into their natural curiosity and engage them in true inquiry.
- Select materials, to the extent possible, that reinforce reason and shared humanity. George Orwell’s *1984* is a classic that students still love, and it’s more relevant than ever. Its presentation of questioning, reality, and orthodoxy provide excellent springboards to learning about the need for independent thinking and free speech. William Lutz’s essay on “The World of Doublespeak” exposes students to the connection between language and free thinking. For younger students, consider Maya Angelou’s poem “The Human Family,” which you can read [here](#), and listen to [here](#). (Apple’s [commercial use of it](#) is powerful too.)



## **Step 9: Document everything and use FAIR transparency**

Document everything that shows what is happening in your school -- curriculum, programming, materials, or conversations involving administrators, colleagues, students, or parents. Take notes, and keep a journal. Be as specific as possible. The act of documenting what is happening can give you a sense of clarity and purpose.

You might use what you write down in a formal complaint, or you might decide to build a legal case. You can also share incident reports of illiberal practices at your school, including images, emails, and instructional materials, on [FAIRtransparency.org](https://fairtransparency.org). FAIRtransparency allows users to anonymously submit materials, which are then reviewed and posted online; you can also submit reviews of your school (both positive and negative). The FAIR legal team often takes action on troubling incidents by reaching out to the organization in order to point out potential violations of civil and constitutional rights and, if possible, to open a constructive dialogue and promote a more pro-human approach to curriculum and programming.

## **Step 10: Live in Truth**

For both yourself and your students: Live in truth, and insist on truth, from yourself and your school. Strive toward being the most courageous version of yourself. Moral courage comes in many forms. Maybe, for today, it was reading this guide. Maybe, tomorrow, you can take another step. Your own moments of courage and risk-taking may very well encourage others to do the same. The more teachers who stand up to illiberalism in our schools, the more likely we are to make a difference.