

Masks. Vaccines. Anti-Racism. Expert Advice for Schools Caught Up in Conflict

To resolve education's biggest fights, pursue the counterintuitive
By Amanda Ripley — August 12, 2021 6 min read



Protesters gather at a Broward County School Board meeting set to discuss a possible school mask mandate in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., earlier this week.

Amy Beth Bennett/South Florida Sun-Sentinel via AP

Amanda Ripley

Amanda Ripley is a journalist and New York Times bestselling author. Her latest book, [*High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped—and How We Get Out*](#), came out in April.

This is not a normal conflict; it's a special category of conflict known as "high conflict." High conflict happens when conflict escalates to a point where it becomes self-perpetuating and all-consuming. Having studied high-conflict elections, divorces, gangs, and even civil wars, I can say that the behavior is chillingly predictable. People become very certain of their own moral righteousness, and they make a lot of mistakes. In time, everyone ends up worse off to varying degrees, always and especially kids. In other words, high conflict is a trap. But it changes everything once you can recognize what it looks like. "A trap is only a trap if you don't know about it," as the author China Miéville wrote in his 1998 novel, *King Rat*. "If you know about it, it's a challenge."

So let's take a tour of this trap, so we can see how it operates. The most important thing to understand is that any intuitive thing you do to end high conflict will probably backfire.

The only good option is to do the counterintuitive thing—and do it very carefully. In that spirit, here are three evidence-based suggestions for educators and administrators navigating high conflict in this perilous back-to-school season.

1. **Avoid the fire starters.** High conflict is fueled by a handful of accelerants.

Humiliation is the most underappreciated fire starter, lurking underneath every high conflict I've seen, from domestic violence to diplomatic standoffs. It is “the nuclear bomb of the emotions,” as the psychologist and physician Evelin Lindner has observed.

So don't set off a nuclear bomb. Don't embarrass parents, students, or politicians. Resist the temptation to win the affection of your side by denigrating the other side. As Nelson Mandela once [told](#) Oprah Winfrey: “There is nobody more dangerous than one who has been humiliated, even when you humiliate him rightly.”

Another powerful fire starter to watch out for is the false binary: the dangerous reduction of different people and beliefs into just two groups—Black and white, good and evil, Democrat and Republican, pro- and anti-vaxxer. Once we are so divided, the categories take on a life of their own, according to decades of research. Try to think about (and talk about) the various stakeholders in your school as complicated human beings who can change.

2. **Investigate the understory.** Every high conflict has the dispute it seems to be about (masks, critical race theory, test scores, etc.) and then the thing it's *really* about. We almost never talk about that understory. This means we get pulled into a lot of the wrong fights with the wrong people—and never have the fight we most need to have.

The understory of most high conflicts I've seen is fear. Sometimes the fear is justified, sometimes not. Either way, it will just metastasize until it gets surfaced.

But our intuition, interestingly, tells us to do the opposite, to put up a wall of certainty and authority in conflict. To pretend fear doesn't exist, in ourselves or anyone else. “When the principal's in a PTA meeting, and people are barking at them, and it's not going well, they get in fix-it mode: ‘What do I say to solve this problem?’” says Matt Smith, a crisis-de-escalation expert at the training provider Aegis. “What we encourage people to do is to take that weight off your shoulders. Don't try to come up with the perfect, home-run answer.”

Instead, try to get very curious about what is really going on for people, underneath their talking points. This starts with listening to them—and proving you have heard them by [reflecting back what they have said](#). At least half of what people need in conflict is to be heard, even if they don't get their way in the end. Researchers have found that people who feel heard make more coherent and nuanced points. They acknowledge their own inconsistencies. They become more flexible. [Patients](#), if they feel understood, leave the hospital more satisfied and more likely to follow their doctor's orders.

It also means asking people [different questions](#), ones that invite them to contemplate the understorey of the conflict. Don't be afraid to talk about fear, starting with your own. Acknowledge out loud that these decisions are hard and that you, too, are struggling to balance all the competing worries. And keep talking, again and again, about the one thing you all care about.

“When I mediate disputes in schools, it always comes down to the kids,” says Marvin Johnson, the executive director of the Center for Alternative Dispute Resolution. “Kids, safety, and learning: These are things that all these parties—the unions, the parents, even some of the politicians—care about.”

3. Build rapport (and eventually, relationships). The goal is not to get out of conflict.

America needs *more* healthy conflict or what I like to call “good conflict” (in homage to the late Congressman John Lewis, who talked about “good trouble”). Good conflict can be heated and stressful, but it goes somewhere. Questions get asked. We experience flashes of anger and frustration—alongside flashes of humor and curiosity. That is the kind of conflict that pushes us to be better people.

But we currently lack the infrastructure for good conflict. We've designed a lot of our institutions, including politics and the media, to create high conflict. “We have to have these difficult conversations, but we haven't built the relationships we need,” says Kern Beare, the founder of the Difficult Conversations Project. “So we need to start building those relationships.”

That takes time, so get started now. Listen in ways people can see and repeatedly remind everyone that while you disagree about many important things, you all care about our kids.

People who cultivate good conflict (in their marriage, their school, or their [synagogue](#)) put money in the bank, so to speak, so that when conflict arises, it is far more likely to stay healthy. They maintain a higher ratio of positive encounters with others for every negative encounter. Psychologists Julie and John Gottman, who have studied conflict in over 3,000 marriages, call this the “magic ratio,” and they find that 5:1 positive to negative interactions is ideal.

So ask the head of your teachers' union to lunch. If a reporter in your town does a story that feels refreshingly nuanced and enlightening, write them a note and cc their editor. Bring donuts to the teachers' lounge. Track down face masks with your students' favorite sports team logos on them and give them out for free. Whenever you can, stand outside your school and welcome each student, with genuine warmth, at the beginning of the day. These fleeting moments matter, and we've had precious few of them for the past 17 months. Think of each connection, no matter how simple, as an investment in your own future sanity.