

Strategies for Educational Leaders to Build Common Ground

Strategy	Details
<p>Start with common ground.</p> <p><i>There's always some overlap.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find common ground – with parents and educators, all parties care deeply about children. • Lead with shared values – such as how vital the family/school partnership is. • Use plain language and avoid words that have become politically charged.
<p>Just the facts... just doesn't work.</p> <p><i>Leading with facts before doing relational work isn't effective.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People tend to seek out information that validates what they already believe and are skeptical of information to the contrary – i.e. confirmation bias. • It takes a lot of mental bandwidth to change deep-seated beliefs, making it difficult to get through with facts – i.e. avoidance of complexity. • Facts are helpful and impactful in a conversation where common ground has laid the foundation.
<p>Lean in with curiosity.</p> <p><i>Listen to understand, not to respond.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't interrupt or go on the defensive. • Realize that you don't have moral certitude – people are shaped by the collection of their lived experiences and so perspectives will vary. • Listen for areas of overlap and agreement and build on those, rather than focusing on points of divergence.
<p>Keep the main thing the main thing.</p> <p><i>Focus on what is most important.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stay focused on what's happening in your district – not what's in the national news media. • When a parent has a particular concern, keep the focus on their child rather than students in general. • What matters most are high quality, safe, and welcoming learning environments for all students.
<p>Always remain the adult.</p> <p><i>Other people don't get to change how you react.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders set the culture and model for everyone what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior. • Don't use your title or position to express authority. • Being the adult doesn't mean being a doormat – if a conversation devolves into verbal and personal attacks, that can be met with silence and a statement that the meeting doesn't seem to be productive and can be picked back up at a later date.
<p>Know what lines you won't cross.</p> <p><i>Stay true to your values while navigating savvy concessions.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflective leadership is key so you are clear ahead of time where your lines are; being firm is different than being harsh and leaders will sometimes have to take a firm stance in service of all students. • Be flexible where possible and look for creative solutions rather than long-standing barriers. • Don't get trapped in a debate about morality or justice.

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<p>People need to feel heard, valued, and respected - not to find total agreement.</p> <p><i>How people feel > final outcome</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While email is a great place for information, it's ineffective for conversation. Difficult conversations are best held in-person – where tone and body language can convey respect. If in-person is not an option, a phone call can be used so that tone can be taken into account. • Empathy is key – and in an extremely difficult conversation, empathy may simply come from knowing how it feels to be frustrated, emotionally flooded, or misunderstood. • Lean into discomfort and show with your body language and tone that you aren't detaching from the conversation. Disagreement can sometimes ultimately lend itself to new solutions and ideas.
<p>De-escalate and lower the temperature.</p> <p><i>Hint: don't say "calm down."</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talking about how a decision was made – so that the concerned party understands the process and care that went into making the decision - can foster increased understanding. • Express appreciation for bringing the concern forth before providing accurate information to counter misinformation or disinformation. • Reflect back what they are saying – this helps to check for understanding and also requires reflection on inappropriate statements.
<p>Use language to bridge back to shared understanding.</p> <p><i>Redirect back to key messages.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I'm glad you brought that up so I can clarify..." • "Yes, and" • "I understand, but the most important point here is..." • "Thank you for sharing your perspective; while I know this wasn't the answer you were seeking, I hope you know how much I value..." • "That's a great question and brings me back to..."

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