

WHAT IS A BETTER ARGUMENT IN MIDDLE SCHOOL?

THE BETTER ARGUMENTS PROJECT



THE BETTER ARGUMENTS PROJECT™

The Better Arguments Project™ is a national civic initiative created to help bridge divides – not by papering over them but by teaching Americans how to have Better Arguments. We believe the more we can equip communities to have arguments rooted both in history and in best practices of constructive communication, the healthier our country will be.

As the Better Arguments Project engages with communities around the country, the Aspen Institute’s Program on Citizenship and American Identity is launching a new segment of this work in partnership with the Bezos Family Foundation, designed specifically to equip middle school students with the skills of Better Arguments in civic life. This report, created in partnership with expert advisers who are listed at the end of this document, is intended to serve as a resource for middle school practitioners who are interested in implementing the Better Arguments Project. This is a supplement to the existing report [“The Better Arguments Project”](#); we recommend using both documents.

Based on this learning, we intend to design a replicable Better Arguments model for education settings. By offering resources, trainings, and seed funding, we will work with partner networks to bring this model to schools around the country.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In this time of deep divisions, many Americans have recognized the need to heal schisms, repair the social fabric, and restore trust and civility in public discourse. The Better Arguments Project is based on the premise that American civic life doesn't need fewer arguments; it needs Better Arguments. We aim to make that possible.

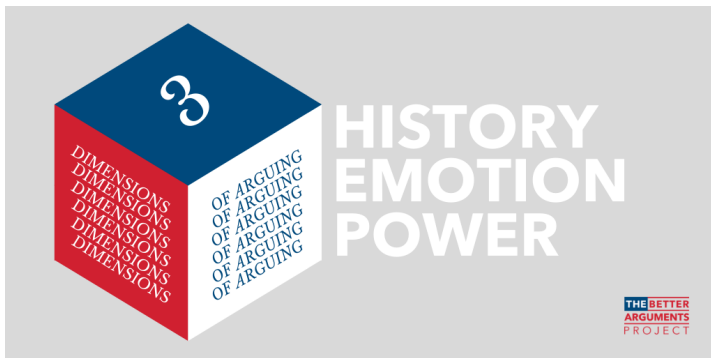
The project stems from the founding idea that America doesn't just contain arguments, America is an argument – between federalist and anti-federalist worldviews, strong national government and local control, liberty and equality, individual rights and collective responsibility, color-blindness and color-consciousness, *pluribus* and *unum*. These definable polarities have shaped the project that is America from its inception. The point of American civic life is never for one side or the other to achieve “final” victory; it is our role as citizens to grapple, in perpetuity, and to discover and forge solutions together.

Perhaps our highest shared value as Americans is our right and freedom to argue. As we engage in arguments about how to prioritize our ideals and reckon with the consequences, we must learn to have Better Arguments – ones informed by historical, cultural, and civic awareness.

Our efforts began with a deep exploration of the question: What is a Better Argument? We synthesized our findings into a [report on key operating principles](#), as referenced above. We are now working in partnership with local groups in several communities around the country to continue our learning, by grounding our approach in the context of real controversies in real communities. We intend to use these lessons to build templates and toolkits for Better Arguments that we will showcase at public events around the country over the next two years. This work is in partnership with Facing History and Ourselves and The Allstate Corporation.

We are now growing the Better Arguments Project to include a branch focused on middle school students and educators, because we believe it is particularly important to equip young people with the skills and tools they need not only to engage in Better Arguments among themselves but also to lead others in their lives and communities to do so. We believe this work is best grounded in education settings, in partnership with educators.

THREE DIMENSIONS OF ARGUING



Underlying context exists within all civic debates, and it can be broken into three major categories: history, emotion, and power. Acknowledging and understanding these categories is a prerequisite to any Better Argument, including in education settings.

First, today's civic arguments are rooted in a historical context. Hot-button issues in national debate often represent unresolved historical legacies that must be acknowledged for a Better Argument to take place.

Second, a Better Argument is one in which all participants use emotional intelligence. Arguments are dramatically enhanced as much by active listening and perspective-taking as they are by evidence and logic.

Finally, a Better Argument requires being honest about power. In many spaces of civil discourse, participants do not enter as equals; they enter reckoning with imbalances. Better Arguments can only exist in contexts in which these inherited inequalities can be named and acknowledged.

To learn more about each of these categories, please see ["What Is a Better Argument?"](#)

PRINCIPLES OF A BETTER ARGUMENT

The following are five major tenets of a Better Argument, as established by the Better Arguments Project’s team and advisers: (1) take winning off the table, (2) prioritize relationships and listen passionately, (3) pay attention to context, (4) embrace vulnerability, and (5) make room to transform. These principles apply to Better Arguments in every setting, and every participant should hold these five principles at heart.

Below, we expand on how each principle applies specifically to education settings. To learn more about the background of these principles, please see [“What Is a Better Argument?”](#)

PRINCIPLES of a BETTER ARGUMENT

1 Take winning off the table

Conventionally, parties enter an argument with a goal of winning, or at least reaching resolution. Instead, the goal of a Better Argument should be framed as the reinstitution of civility to build a common community.

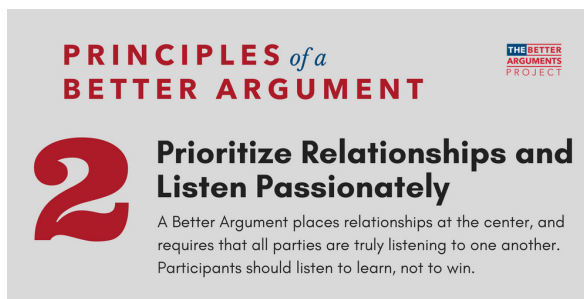
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In school settings, if students are taught argument-related skills at all, the instruction is most often in the context of debating. Although there are benefits to this debate learning, many of its elements are in direct opposition to having Better Arguments. According to Sheldon Berman, superintendent of schools in Andover, Massachusetts, inherent to debate is a points-scoring culture, which promotes polarization and prompts participants to listen only with the goal of defeating the opponent, rather than learning from him or her.

By their very nature, debates typically affirm what students already believe – and teach them to enter conversations with the goal of winning. Berman noted that this dynamic leaves little to no room for students to consider and empathize with other viewpoints.

Better Arguments organizers should take note from debate clubs that any given topic can be a portal for developing both content knowledge and social-emotional skills such as confidence, curiosity, critical thinking, communication, and leadership. Polly Stansell, vice president of product at the Committee for Children, emphasized that both categories of learning – that is, developing knowledge and social-emotional skills – should be priorities; in many cases, the two go hand in hand. For example, Jessica Wood, manager of Student Project Initiatives at EL Education, noted that her programming is designed to encourage students to explore diverse opinions because the activities provide students the opportunity to learn new information while positively stimulating emotional intelligence. Jacqueline Jodl, former executive director of the Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, expressed that one of the biggest challenges of her work was establishing the connection between social-emotional skills and academic learning. According to Jodl, there is a huge demand for this type of work as well as a need to meet students as “whole students” with different lived experiences. Better Arguments in classrooms should center learning on students’ lived experiences, meeting students where they are academically, emotionally, and socially. Maureen Loughnane, executive director of Facing History and Ourselves in Chicago, noted that building these skills in middle school will benefit students throughout their lives – for example, they are more likely to be able to advocate themselves and work on a team when they join the job market.

Heather Van Benthuyzen, director of social science and civic engagement at Chicago Public Schools, emphasized the value of argument as a vehicle to increase understanding of the concept that is being argued. She noted that the dilemmas or issues that we choose to discuss with students are important because dilemmas and issues have no easy solutions or quick fixes. An argument can situate adults and youth on common ground as learners in an exchange of perspectives that ultimately strengthens understanding of the problem and informs possible solutions.



PRINCIPLES of a BETTER ARGUMENT

2 Prioritize Relationships and Listen Passionately

A Better Argument places relationships at the center, and requires that all parties are truly listening to one another. Participants should listen to learn, not to win.

Every argument must start with relationship-building. Sharif El Mekki, principal of Mastery Charter Schools-Shoemaker Campus, a public charter school in Philadelphia, describes this step as an agreement of shared humanity. Ian Lindquist, executive director of the Public Interest Fellowship, noted that this aspect is especially relevant for middle school students, as they are in a development stage in which they seek shared interests and attempt to connect with peers.

According to several advisers, educators can foster relationships by inviting students to explore and select argument topics together, rather than the educator assigning a topic for them. This approach would encourage students to listen to classmates with whom they may not interact regularly, and it would allow students to hone social-emotional skills. Better Arguments organizers should consider relationship-building a critical part of the Better Arguments process, and they should reserve adequate time to complete this step. Organizers should build off this foundation, so that the relationships students establish can continue to grow over the course of the experience.

Andrew Wilkes, senior director of policy and advocacy at Generation Citizen, expressed that involving youth as context experts goes beyond fostering relationships alone. “When topics are determined by students, they can speak to their lived realities and reveal new insights,” Wilkes said. “Of note, involving diverse youth voices – in terms of region, race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and other facets of identity – can unearth often overlooked components of not only youth experiences, but overlooked components of entire communities insofar as youth are members of those communities.”

Students should not only listen to one another but also collect broader community perspectives by engaging with parents and other outside influences; this promotes local buy-in, ensures that the argument is shaped by a diverse range of perspectives and experiences, and activates students as leaders. Brian Brady, president of Mikva Challenge, stated, “Youth can bring a lot to civic conversations – ideas, reality checks, common sense, honesty, expertise, and great questions. The act of involving students also has a civilizing effect sometimes on adults, because they bring their ‘better’ selves when youth are part of a discussion and become less negative with others they disagree with.” Better Arguments organizers should consider opportunities for students to engage their communities and for community members to continue to engage with the process.



PRINCIPLES of a BETTER ARGUMENT

3 Pay Attention to Context

A Better Argument acknowledges culture. Understanding the presence of culture in any debate increases its accessibility. Better Arguments within a community should begin with specific questions relevant to that community.

Any Better Arguments process in school settings must be designed with multiple contexts in mind: teacher contexts, student contexts, and school systems contexts. Regarding teacher contexts, Emma Humphries, chief education officer at iCivics, emphasized the importance of addressing difficult issues – rather than avoiding them – in classrooms. Indeed, David Bobb, president of the Bill of Rights Institute, expressed that teachers have a strong desire to address these issues,

but they face significant obstacles. Many teachers do not have access to the right tools and information to adequately address these issues with students. Further, some teachers are also met with resistance from parents or the school administrators, either because of the controversial nature of the issue at hand or because of competing priorities. Teachers are measured by specific standards. While these standards do not necessarily run counter to an educator's ability to address difficult issues in a classroom, they are not always conducive to doing so, according to Patrice Dawkins-Jackson, director of the Post Baccalaureate Fellowship Program at Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

It is important to note also according to Charles Cooper, an educator and education consultant, that many small and midsize school districts operate in silos, so they may benefit from experiences that bring educators together across districts to explore ways to take advantage of opportunities, such as having Better Arguments.

Organizers must also acknowledge and appreciate students' lived experiences. Van Benthuyzen explained that elevating and valuing perspectives includes valuing youth perspectives – no matter their age – on issues that affect them, their families, and their communities. Often young people are engaged as learners only, not as individuals who have valuable insights and perspectives that should inform our collective understanding of the issue. Therefore, engaging youth in Better Arguments provides an opportunity to nurture teachers and students as co-learners and investigators into the topic. This is critical for building student agency and authority in learning and supports teachers in developing a democratic classroom culture.

Further, Caroline Bermudez, former senior communications manager at the Aspen Institute's Education and Society Program, noted that educators in the United States, who are predominantly white and female, often do not share lived experiences with their students. Better Arguments should be centered on students' ability to articulate their own lived experiences; in this way, the activity is both intellectually honest and an opportunity to increase understanding and trust between educators and students. Emily Davis, an education consultant at Squadbuck, added that this self-reflection is a way of engaging students as citizens, and opportunities that empower students to self-reflect as citizens is especially significant in middle school. Cooper noted that this type of activity is one way to break down different influences that have shaped student opinions. For example, Laura McBain, K12 lab director of community and implementation at the Stanford d School, expressed that, "students need to experience opportunities to think for themselves in a meaningful way – it is through these experiences that they discover their values and their own arguments."

Finally, when implementing Better Arguments in middle schools, one must acknowledge different contexts of the wide range of schools in this country. Natalie Gordon, instructional superintendent of Washington, DC, Public Schools, noted that finding time to engage in topics that extend beyond a prescribed curriculum is an issue of equity in schools. She stated that Better Arguments must be designed to meet needs in under-resourced schools and not just high-achieving schools.

PRINCIPLES of a BETTER ARGUMENT

4 Embrace Vulnerability

In civic life today, many Americans only engage with circles that confirm their own worldviews. One major reason why this withdrawal occurs is because entering a space of argument means making yourself vulnerable.

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Engaging with views that are different than one's own requires courage, and courage requires vulnerability. One way to be able to engage different views is through storytelling and inquiry, according to Molly McMahan, director of The Teachers Guild, a nonprofit initiative of Plussed at Riverdale Country School that is being incubated by IDEO.

Whenever possible, teachers should model vulnerability. Brady expressed that vulnerability is a process of

building more empathetic and student-centered classrooms in general, which benefits student development and builds trust between teachers and students. McMahon and Kwame Simmons, CEO, The Simmons Advantage, emphasized that relationships between teachers and students are one of the most important units of change in schools. Simmons noted that in order to be effective educators in schools, teachers must know their students' priorities. According to Davis, when teachers are empowered to do so, they in turn empower students to do so as well. She noted that this is one way to encourage students to actively reflect on their values.

Embracing vulnerability requires both sensitivity and concrete skills. Both educators and students should be prepared to be uncomfortable. To this point, El Mekki noted that teachers must be empowered to disarm emotional barriers; by doing so, they will help students to be brave. Gordon noted that teachers should be provided with the training to facilitate such conversations. Sheldon Berman said a guiding question for educators should be: "How do we create safe spaces for students to take risks?"

When teachers and students are empowered to be vulnerable, according to Wilkes, we can accomplish two things: "Model deliberation and argument whereby the dignity, agency, and efficacy of all human beings is seen as worthy and able of self-agency; and share power in a more equitable, inclusive way by giving youth voices a seat at tables that often have excluded them, by design or default." Kent Lenci, former personal growth and development coordinator at Brookwood School in Massachusetts states, "educators are every bit as human as the students they teach. They, too, live in a polarized country, and it can be just as tricky for them to reach across lines of divide as it is for students. This work can be uncomfortable for all parties, but leading a Better Argument provides teachers the opportunity to lean into that discomfort and deepen their own capacity to empathize."



PRINCIPLES of a BETTER ARGUMENT

5 Make Room to Transform

A Better Argument is a transformational experience for all involved. Without a goal of winning or reaching resolution, the goal of a Better Argument becomes to change how we engage with one another in order to build a community.

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School settings are the prime environment to grow intellectually, socially, and emotionally. These moments of growth lead to others, sparking a positive cycle for students, teachers, parents, and communities.

In a Better Argument, growth or transformation does not necessarily mean changing one's mind. No Better Argument should pit one side against another; rather, according to Brady, a wide spectrum of viewpoints is at play, not just the most prevailing opinions. A Better

Argument provides opportunities for mutual victories across this array of viewpoints. Meaza Yalew, youth programs manager at Citizen University, expressed that achievable goals include things like understanding the range of views at play, understanding one's own opinion and articulating it to the group, and destroying preconceptions and assumptions. In this way, according to Brady, Better Arguments can be a jumping-off point for collective action.

In this sense, Better Arguments can serve as a vehicle to bring democratic values and outcomes to school settings, helping to foster democratic school culture. "Schools are the very place we expect to prepare students for their roles as citizens in a democratic republic, yet schools are rarely run democratically," according to Humphries. "Making space for Better Arguments, especially at the school level and perhaps around school issues, gives students a voice in their schools and promotes stronger democratic cultures. And this is an issue of equity. Generally, students in properly resourced and achieving schools are more likely than their peers in under-resourced schools to experience opportunities for voice and participation."

CORE ACTION ELEMENTS FOR BETTER ARGUMENTS IN CLASSROOMS

When implementing Better Arguments in schools, organizers should consider the following core action steps:

- **Define the infrastructure.** Create a space to convene in person, whether in a classroom or elsewhere in the school or community. Make every effort to ensure that the space is inclusive for all students and conducive to bravery. Determine the timing. For example, consider whether the Better Argument should take place within one class period, over multiple class periods, or outside regular school hours.
- **Select the topic.** Arrange for students to take ownership by collectively determining the topic of the argument. Draw parameters to ensure the topic is viable. Make space and time for students to engage one another and their broader community in making this decision. Encourage participants to identify the position they hold on the topics being explored and incentivize them to engage with peers who oppose their view. Make all efforts to foster humanization and relationship-building as part of this step. Ensure that a wide range of perspectives are considered before a decision is made and that no students are prevented from being heard.
- **Agree to a social contract.** Participants should unanimously commit to ground rules that have been determined by the group. These ground rules should begin with the five principles of a Better Argument and may scaffold from there. Ensure that each participant knows and understands each principle. Provide the opportunity to hear from students about how they think each principle could manifest in the course of the Better Argument. Welcome participants to add additional ground rules.
- **Practice the argument.** Keeping the ground rules in mind, facilitate participants engaging in Better Arguments. Have students self-identify their position on the given topic, and then intentionally mix the groups so that participants must interact with those who hold differing viewpoints. Use question prompts to help participants first humanize and then enter the Better Argument. Facilitate by encouraging directness and honesty while adhering to the social contract. Encourage the spirit of trial and error. Factors such as timing, group sizes, and number of question prompts are all flexible.
- **Reflect.** Ease participants out of the heat of an argument by making space for reflection. Ask participants to consider what they notice about the process itself and about how their post-argument perspective compares to their pre-argument perspective. Participants should be asked to reflect on what seemed most important to the person (or people) with whom they were having the Better Argument.
- **Encourage ongoing commitment.** Better Arguments develop students' skills over time. Encourage students to commit to continue having Better Arguments in their own lives and invite them to share how they will do it. Consider providing an opportunity for the full group of participants to agree on a shared action step that they develop. Find opportunities throughout the school year to tie in lessons learned and ideas developed from Better Arguments.

THE PARTNERS

The Better Arguments Project a collaboration among the Aspen Institute Citizenship and American Identity Program, Facing History and Ourselves, and The Allstate Corporation. Middle school-related activities are made possible by the Bezos Family Foundation.



The Bezos Family Foundation is a private, independent foundation established by Jackie and Mike Bezos, along with their family. The Bezos Family Foundation supports rigorous, inspired learning environments for young people, from birth through high school, to put their education into action. Through investments in research, public awareness and programs, the foundation works to elevate the field of education and improve life outcomes for all children.



The Aspen Institute is a global nonprofit organization committed to realizing a free, just, and equitable society. Founded in 1949, the Institute drives change through dialogue, leadership, and action to help solve the most important challenges facing the United States and the world. Headquartered in Washington, DC, the Institute has a campus in Aspen, Colorado, and an international network of partners.



Facing History and Ourselves is a global educational organization that reaches millions of students worldwide every year. Using the lessons of history – and history in the making – Facing History equips teachers to provide students with the skills to think critically and wrestle with difficult issues. Teachers work closely with students to make personal connections between the past and their present. The rigorous curriculum sparks their desire to look beyond themselves and participate in the broader world. Facing History is creating future generations of engaged, informed, and responsible decision-makers who will stand up for justice, truth, and equality when faced with injustice, misinformation, and bigotry. Facing History transforms required lessons in history into inspired lessons in humanity, empowering youth who will change the world for the better.



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