

Preventing the Spread of White Nationalism in Schools

This sidebar is adapted from *Confronting White Nationalism in Schools: A Toolkit*, which is available for free at westernstatescenter.org/schools. Through five scenarios—from a student secretly carving a swastika on a desk to openly advocating for a white pride student group—this toolkit offers practical advice for the whole school community. It also shares symbols of white nationalism to aid recognition and explains the misguided thinking inherent in five common defenses of white nationalism.

Of the many strengths of this toolkit, one that stands out

is its empathy for youth who are being recruited by white nationalists. It warns staff to focus on how to meet these students' social and emotional needs (e.g., for belonging) and warns students to "Keep the health of your school community central to stated goals, rather than punishment for perpetrators. Pushback from peers can backfire, increasing tensions and seeming to justify requests for separate white entities and events." Ultimately, the toolkit's aim is to help educators "construct a democracy where everyone has value."

—EDITORS



BY NORA FLANAGAN, JESSICA ACEE, AND LINDSAY SCHUBINER

Because schools are hubs of our communities, they have become battlegrounds for extremist organizing. It's easy to miss an unfamiliar white nationalist symbol or feel unsure about how to respond to a student citing a white nationalist source in the classroom. There's a lot to keep track of when working with young people; we want to make it easier to recognize these behaviors (and those responsible) and to take action.

Everyone who engages in the life of a school is in a unique position to isolate and push back against the growing white nationalist movement and the hateful narratives it touts. It's time to own that power. Our job is to build schools where everyone feels valued and where our students can grow to be engaged citizens of an inclusive democracy.

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All teenagers seek a sense of identity and belonging. White nationalist organizations know this and look for ways to connect with young people in order to grow their base. It takes vigilance on the part of teachers, administrators, and parents to ensure that all members of a school community feel connected in positive ways and are not left vulnerable to extremist rhetoric or recruitment.

This toolkit works best as a guide with suggestions and resources to help school communities navigate their own questions and challenges. Students, teachers, staff, administrators, parents, and other community entities can collaborate to adapt these approaches and find new solutions. We focus on high schools, but many of these resources also apply to middle schools and colleges.

Scenario: Invocation of White Nationalist Ideology

The best classroom environments support students seeking and engaging with outside sources. Research skills remain among the most vital to postsecondary success, alongside critical thinking and the ability to assess source material. White nationalist online personalities, bloggers, public speakers, and other prominent figures actively seek to influence and enlist young

people with access to larger school communities. Students need support as they navigate the endless material available to them to ensure that their social, emotional, and cognitive development are not impeded by the dangerous rhetoric of extremism.

Examples

- Students citing white nationalism or extremist source material in schoolwork.
- Students citing, invoking, or parroting white nationalist source material in class discussions.
- Students distributing or promoting these materials on school property or through school-sanctioned platforms, including learning management systems or class web pages.

Suggested Approaches

Students

- If you feel comfortable, ask follow-up questions of your classmate in discussions or in peer editing situations; examine resources and viewpoints.
- If a student shares materials outside of class, bring these to the attention of a staff member you trust.
- Lead by example: research all source material, and research any sources with

Endnotes

1. *Not in Our Town II*, produced by P. O'Neill and R. Miller (Public Broadcasting System, 1996).
2. H. Allam and R. Nakhlawi, "Black, Brown, and Extremist: Across the Far-Right Spectrum, People of Color Play a More Visible Role," *Washington Post*, May 16, 2021.
3. J. Tisby, "What Columbus Really Thought About Native Americans," *The Witness*, October 8, 2018.
4. See, for example, A. Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001); and J. Lewis, "Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation," *New York Times*, July 30, 2020.
5. D. Lugo, "4 in 10 Oregonians Agree with Core White Nationalist Arguments, Survey Reveals," *Salem Statesman Journal*, June 14, 2021.
6. Southern Poverty Law Center, "White Nationalist," splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/white-nationalist.
7. J. MacFarlane, A. Johnson, and R. Godsil, "Our Brains and Difference: Implicit Bias, Racial Anxiety, and Stereotype Threat in Education," CSEE; and T. West et al., "Contagious Anxiety: Anxious European Americans Can Transmit Their Physiological Reactivity to African Americans," *Psychological Science* 28, no. 12 (2017): 1796–806.
8. H. McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (London: One World, 2022).
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10. R. Rothstein, "Suppressed History: The Intentional Segregation of America's Cities," *American Educator* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 32–37; and S. Menendian, S. Gambhir, and A. Gales, *The Roots of Structural Racism Project: Twenty-First Century Racial Residential Segregation in the United States* (Berkeley: Othering and Belonging Institute, University of California, Berkeley, June 2021).
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which you are not familiar to check for bias or problematic affiliations.

- Ask your teachers if they keep lists of trusted online sources or if they can prepare a lesson to help students better understand bias in source material.

Staff

- Establish assessment criteria for source material in student work, including for any structured discussions or other classroom activities to create and clarify accountability.
- Collaborate with students to set classroom policies and procedures that establish community standards for cited materials.
- Consider a workshop at the start of each year to review how students can vet source material for bias.
- Meet with the student's counselor or other wellness staff members to see if they have noticed any increase in aggression or frustration that might correspond to an interest in extremist ideology.
- Make an administrator aware of your concerns; include evidence and relevant links.

Administration

- Meet with the students and teachers involved to understand their concerns.
- As appropriate, meet with the student who cited or promoted this material to understand the appeal and interest: for what frustrations are they seeking validation from extremists?
- Consider a workshop for staff to help promote effective online research practices across disciplines. Involve your school librarian to design and implement research practices.
- Ask teachers what resources might help them reinforce effective research skills and what norms and policies have worked in their classrooms to clarify acceptable and valid source materials.
- Consider adapting some of these as standards across the school.

Parents

- A basic awareness of what kids absorb online is elemental to maintaining their

safety and understanding their evolving perspectives. Sites not explicitly dedicated to white nationalist ideology—including Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan (now called 8kun)—can host robust sections where kids are actively recruited.*

- Open a conversation with your child about the spectrum of validity and bias in online resources, both academic and those rooted in personal interest. What YouTube channels do they follow? What podcasts have they heard about what subjects?
- If you have concerns, make an appointment with a counselor or staff member you feel knows your child well. If your child shares concerns with you, help them voice these concerns to staff members they trust.

Community Members

- The ability to teach and reinforce effective research skills often hinges on the resources necessary to do so. Advocate for a certified full-time librarian in each of your local schools and request information about how the school teaches research methodology.
- Consider joining or seeking election to school boards, advisory boards, or panels that help make decisions about a school's budget and goals.

Conclusion

Everyone has the right to embrace their identity, but white nationalism and other forms of bigoted extremism threaten the safety of the vulnerable, robbing us all of our humanity and the things that link us together. Students who are attracted to white nationalism are often vulnerable themselves. They may be disillusioned, feel marginalized, or struggle with untreated trauma or mental health issues. We must show them compassion when it seems the hardest to give, because that is what white

*To learn more about these and other extremist message board sites, see "Variations on a Theme? Comparing 4chan, 8kun, and Other chans' Far-Right 'pol' Boards" in the February 2021 issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism*: jstor.org/stable/26984798.

nationalism cannot offer our students. We can care for our young people while also starving white nationalism of the oxygen it needs to grow. □

Success Stories

In a US history class, a student repeatedly cited white nationalist online sources, including speeches by Richard Spencer (the leader of a think tank that cloaks bigotry in intellectualism). His parents did not seem receptive to the teacher's concerns when she met with them. The teacher revised future assessment rubrics to account for the viability and academic validity of source material, ruling out the vast majority of white nationalist publications and figures.

A student used a recognized hate symbol as her avatar on a classroom discussion page. Concerned students emailed the teacher about it. When the teacher met with the student outside of class, she insisted she didn't know the image carried racist connotations. The teacher shared evidence with her from reputable sources, and they agreed that the student would remove the avatar out of respect for her classmates.

What Not to Do

Don't treat all student sources as equal; they're not. Validating white nationalism is not the same as valuing other viewpoints. Rather, it concedes credibility to rhetoric that demeans members of our school communities.

Don't sweep it away and move on. Young people are seeking and finding white nationalist sources at alarming rates. Sharing this material via schoolwork or otherwise can indicate that a student needs support. Plan and provide aftercare by engaging with school wellness staff.

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