
POLARIZATION, POLITICS, AND FAMILY VOICE IN SCHOOLS:
EXTENDING A FRAMEWORK FOR INCLUSIVE FREEDOM TO
FAMILY-SCHOOL INTERACTIONS

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Much has been written regarding student and educator expression in school; however, until recently, family expression seemed to be overlooked in debates on speech and education. Though discussion among education practitioners and researchers on family-school partnerships has continued for over thirty years, thoughtful analysis of interactions between families and schools, including how schools respond to controversial speech, is still required. Codified in federal education law, parental involvement, also commonly referred to as family engagement, is a required school activity for those receiving Title I funds.¹ These requirements emerge from a research base which correlates family-school partnership with benefits for students,² families,³ and teachers.⁴ Accordingly, effective family-school partnerships are also linked to improved communication between home and school,⁵ and show promise as a strategy to increase family-school collaboration with greater attention to equity.⁶

“Until recently” is an important qualifier because though promising findings linking family-school partnerships and student success warrant family engagement’s establishment as an effective improvement strategy, little research exists examining some of the more challenging aspects of family-school interaction. Recent publicized events illustrate the challenges schools face responding to controversial family speech. Throughout the COVID-19

¹ No Child Left Behind Act, Pub. L. No. 107-110, § 1118 (2001).; Every Student Succeeds Act, Pub. L. No. 114-95, 129 Stat. 1802 (2015).

² Joyce L. Epstein- et al., *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2018).

³ Ming-E Chen, Jeffrey Alvin Anderson, and Lara Watkins, “Parent perceptions of connectedness in a full service community school project,” *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 25 (2016): 2268-2278.; Julie O’Donnell, Sandra L. Kirkner, and Nancy Meyer-Adams. “Low-Income, Urban Consumers’ Perceptions of Community School Outreach Practices, Desired Services, and Outcomes,” *School Community Journal* 18, no. 2 (2008): 147-164.

⁴ Beverly A. Perrachione, Vicki J. Rosser, and George J. Petersen, “Why Do They Stay? Elementary Teachers’ Perceptions of Job Satisfaction and Retention,” *Professional Educator* 32, no. 2 (2008): n2.

⁵ Matthew A. Kraft and Shaun M. Dougherty, “The effect of teacher–family communication on student engagement: Evidence from a randomized field experiment,” *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness* 6, no. 3 (2013): 199-222.

⁶ Ann M. Ishimaru, *Just schools: Building equitable collaborations with families and communities* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2019).

pandemic, new dimensions of these interactions emerged. As debates over masking and in-person or virtual schooling raged, a study by the American Psychological Association found that “over 40% of school administrators report[ed] verbal or threatening violence from parents” from July 2020 to June 2021.⁷

Still today, legal battles questioning the balance of power between families and school continue. These legal challenges position schools as institutions that impose their views on students and families without providing adequate opportunities for collaboration on weighty topics.⁸ Additionally, families in these proceedings are wary of their children being required to adopt a district-promoted worldview.⁹ While these cases are brought by small groups of families and may seem like fringe complaints, their emergence indicates that schools are struggling to engage all families and navigate controversial family-school interactions productively. Compounded by rising political polarization in the United States and the centering of “parent rights” in education, school leaders require a framework through which they can seriously consider families’ diverse viewpoints, including those that are controversial, while maintaining a publicly legitimate position from which to respond.

Like primary and secondary schools in the US,¹⁰ considerations around speech on the college campus are ongoing. In *Free Speech on Campus*,¹¹ Sigal Ben-Porath offers that the college campus’s unique values and nature demand unique considerations around speech. In response, Ben-Porath proposes a framework called *Inclusive Freedom*, which centers both equal access and freedom of expression in campus dialogue. Schools could learn from this framework when developing dispositions and strategies for engaging with families. Like colleges, a school’s unique positioning in a community demands a thoughtful approach to family speech. In this way, extending Ben-Porath’s framework for Inclusive Freedom to family-school interactions, which promotes both free expression and access to ensure the inclusion of diverse viewpoints, seems to benefit the interests of schools, families, and students.¹² By considering the apparent values and nature of schools in relation to this framework, I argue that Inclusive Freedom is a compelling starting point for discussions around managing family-school interactions productively.

⁷ Susan Dvorak McMahon et al., “Violence against Educators and School Personnel: Crisis during COVID. Technical Report,” *American Psychological Association* (2022).

⁸ *Kaltenbach v. Hilliard City Schools*, 2:23-cv-00187, (S.D. Ohio Jan 16, 2023) ECF No. 1.

⁹ *Parents Defending Education v. Olentangy Local School Dist.*, 23-3630, (6th Cir. Jul 31, 2023) ECF No. 1.

¹⁰ Primary and secondary schools include kindergarten through 12th grade. In this paper, “school” refers to public primary and secondary schools in the US.

¹¹ Sigal R. Ben-Porath, *Free speech on campus* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

¹² The term “families” in this paper refers to any adult caretaker in a child’s life.

In this paper, I first describe the foundations of Ben-Porath’s framework for Inclusive Freedom, presenting the unique contextual factors that require an explicit commitment to managing free speech on college campuses. I will also discuss Inclusive Freedom’s grounding in dignitary safety, which may help us imagine some boundaries when considering broad promotion of speech and access. Before considering how Inclusive Freedom applies to family-school interactions, I will make clear how this work responds to timely interests of school leaders. I ultimately argue that a framework for Inclusive Freedom provides enough substance and contextual congruency for schools to consider it as a promising conceptual starting point for negotiating family-school interactions.

EXPLORING BEN-PORATH’S FRAMEWORK FOR INCLUSIVE FREEDOM

Ben-Porath’s 2017 book, *Free Speech on Campus*, argues for the broad promotion and protection of free speech on college campuses, not because free speech is a core value of academia, but because it is central to the pursuit of those academic values.¹³ Here, Ben-Porath makes a distinction between free speech and academic freedom, arguing that though public institutions in particular are bound by the first amendment, it is not a core value to the institution. Rather, academic freedom is a core value, with Ben-Porath noting, “it does both more and less than free speech.”¹⁴ While academic freedom does function like free speech in the sense that it protects academics pursuing controversial lines of work, it does not extend the same expansive liberty. Ben-Porath notes that academic freedom “precludes plagiarism or mischaracterization of research results,” among other forms of speech that could be defensible under the first amendment.¹⁵ Further, both the first amendment and academic freedom provided little guidance in how we might structure conversations among campus community members, both in and outside the classroom that might maximize the fruitfulness of these liberties. Ben-Porath’s position that free speech is in fact not a core value of universities demands an approach to managing speech on campus that goes beyond the constitution.

This should not be taken to mean that promoting an environment of free speech on campus is not important. Pursuing a lofty value like academic freedom requires an openness to challenging ideas and diverse perspectives, which a commitment to free speech facilitates and fosters. Beyond considering free speech in relation to the institution’s core values, Ben-Porath also considers free speech in relation to the institution’s nature. Colleges are both educational and civic institutions. Universities provide students with diverse academic experiences towards the acquisition of skills and knowledge, while also preparing them to engage in public life through exercises in leadership and the opportunity to engage in a diverse community. The college’s unique dual

¹³ Ben-Porath, 20.

¹⁴ Ben-Porath, 20.

¹⁵ Ben-Porath, 20.

context, as well as the institution's core values require a commitment to speech that looks different than in the public sphere.

Ben-Porath points out that conversations around free speech are sometimes driven by "extreme positions."¹⁶ While most protests or other expressions of free speech on campuses are carried out peacefully and constructively, publicized and politicized clashes between student groups and speakers, for example, have distilled common talking points about free speech on campus into two views. One view is that some curtailment to speech is necessary to protect students who may be vulnerable due to their marginalized identities. Conversely, there is the view that any curtailment to speech is an intolerable expression of political correctness. Here, Ben-Porath identifies a false binary: that freedom of speech stands at odds with diversity, equity, and inclusion.¹⁷ To address this, Ben-Porath cannot invoke legal claims about free speech. They do not apply neatly when considering context, values, and positioning of colleges and universities. Rather, she proposes something both radical and simple: a framework for Inclusive Freedom, centering both equal access and freedom of expression in the college campus's unique context.

Inclusive Freedom is two-pronged. First, free speech should be protected as broadly as possible, as it is necessary to meet the core values of colleges and universities, enable a free and open exchange, and to satisfy their unique context.¹⁸ Second, Inclusive Freedom gives equal weight to the inclusion of all willing and interested participants to this free exchange. In short, free speech should be protected for all, with special attention to any policies, practices, or norms that would cool one's interest or perceived ability to participate.¹⁹ A broad promotion of free speech on campus through the tenants of Inclusive Freedom ensures that students and faculty do not seclude themselves in the security of concurrency and politeness and allows for those impacted by free speech to respond without fear of their position within the campus community. Echoing Justice Louis Brandeis, Ben-Porath reminds us "the only cure for bad speech is more speech."²⁰

To employ Inclusive Freedom, a commitment to inclusion and belonging is key. Here, Ben-Porath is right to point out that university considerations regarding free speech are complicated by the fact that, for many students, the campus is their literal home. Presumably, all persons should be entitled to a sense of safety in their homes. Further, many college campuses are increasingly diverse and often are the "most diverse community" many students have experienced in their lives so far.²¹ Campus interests like providing a safe home for students, and core institutional values like academic freedom, require

¹⁶ Ben-Porath, 11.

¹⁷ Ben-Porath, 12.

¹⁸ Ben-Porath, 56.

¹⁹ Ben-Porath, 37.

²⁰ Ben-Porath, 44.

²¹ Ben-Porath, 32.

that campus processes for protecting and promoting free speech be informed by the “makeup of the campus student body (and staff).”²² Even on campuses that do not seem particularly diverse, there are underlying identities or commitments (e.g., religious) that require a college to consider their campus makeup when creating an inclusive space for speech.

At the same time, colleges and universities have a civic commitment to prepare students for the world beyond the campus where they will inevitably be confronted by a diversity of ideas and identities. While colleges and universities should welcome the opportunity to engage with challenging and unconventional speech, they must commit to an on-going dialogue and negotiation with the campus community that results in a process for protecting and promoting speech that is responsive to the identities and positionalities of the individuals that make up the community. Inclusive Freedom will be explored further as a conceptual grounding point for school leaders in their attempts to manage family-school interactions in the below section, “Inclusive Freedom in Schools.”

CONSIDERING THE LIMITS OF GOOD SPEECH: DIGNITARY HARM AND SAFETY

As mentioned earlier, Ben-Porath dismisses the notion that legal limits of free speech suffice when considering harmful speech on the college campus. A shift in perspective, however, can help us parse this further. Free speech is often defended by centering the “autonomy and liberty” of the speaker. Shifting, however, and centering the outcome of speech, we might notice that some speech, including that protected by the first amendment, may undermine the dignity of community members, causing what is called “dignitary harm.”²³ Colleges, as academic and civic institutions, have an interest in promoting spaces in which students feel safe as community members. Speech policies should aim to mitigate dignitary harm as it directly cools participation from some identities on campus while requiring those who do engage in campus discourse, nonetheless, to also navigate any doubt cast on their community status. Dignitary harm is especially insidious due to its accumulative impact. Harmful speech, when allowed to fill community discourse, expresses to marginalized community members that their voices will not be properly engaged or heard.²⁴

To envision the conditions for dignitary safety on a college campus, we must first try to define some criteria. Considering Ben-Porath’s arguments for dignitary safety as a standard for managing speech on campus, these criteria might look like the following:

1. When assessing challenging speech, the dignity of those impacted by speech are centered, not the speaker.
2. The speech must not undermine a member’s community status.
3. The speech must not cool a community member’s ability to participate.

²² Ben-Porath, 33.

²³ Ben-Porath, 62.

²⁴ Ben-Porath, 58.

Acknowledging that dignitary harm is not randomly distributed,²⁵ and often disproportionately impacts already marginalized community members, underscores the importance of a commitment to dignitary safety. Censorship may seem like an appropriate response, especially in consideration of community safety. Censorship especially attempts not grounded in any guiding principle and other efforts that limit freedom, however, produces many predictable and undesirable institutional consequences, such as promoting false equivalencies or attempts to balance diverse viewpoints amongst students, patronizing students in marginalized groups, and responding to harmful speech on their behalf. Some might argue that using dignitary safety as a standard for assessing speech may simply be a new type of censorship, and I can accept this critique. All institutions, however, make ongoing determinations about what is or is not tolerable in their spaces. Dignitary safety offers an alternative to academic freedom and the first amendment emphasizing the rights of the receiver of speech to determine what is tolerable in an academic community. Further, guarding against paternalistic attitudes towards marginalized identities, a primary condition for dignitary safety must be access. Not just access to the space generally, but access that resounds outwardly the unquestionable status of an individual as a community member.

While developing conditions that produce dignitary safety on campus requires ongoing negotiation, institutional flexibility, and responsiveness to the evolving identities and experiences of students, Inclusive Freedom provides two guideposts for shaping policies and practices on campus that do not simply reframe the tension between broad speech protections and protecting the ability of all to participate, but helps us to imagine some lines that could be drawn around the types of speech we tolerate. Policies should seek to minimize the dignitary risk a community member must take to engage in campus discourse, thereby promoting a diverse and robust campus speech environment by inviting more viewpoints. Policies should take seriously the accumulating and cooling nature of dignitary harm by forbidding and acting upon speech that creates harm. By seeking to promote dignitary safety while guided by the two prongs of Inclusive Freedom, we can begin to assess the desirability of one campus speech policy over an alternative.

A NEED IN U.S. SCHOOLS

Summarizing concepts from *Free Speech on Campus*, the management of speech in the campus context is crucial to create a community in which dignitary safety is prioritized at the same time as academic freedom. But why should this type of conceptual undergirding be attractive to school leaders? There are many interested parties in a child's education. While sometimes diminished or forgotten, chief among these parties is their family. Not only do families have a parental interest in education, they have a civic interest as well. Schools have the complex task of creating standards for communication with families in both

²⁵ Ben-Porath, 58.

formal and informal situations. This task is further complicated by the rise of communication platforms available to schools and the challenge of ensuring access for all families across these selected platforms, not to mention the rise of politicized family-school interactions.

The challenges associated with managing family-school interactions are mounting for practitioners. For example, in October of 2023, while presenting to district family engagement administrators from across the US, I discussed a set of roles that family members can fulfill in family-school interactions beyond simply receiving and providing supports. When I began to discuss families as “initiators” and “co-designers” of initiatives at schools,²⁶ some were interested, but one participant was suspicious. The administrator expressed how some families want to ban books or change curriculums so certain topics won’t be covered in school. She mentioned families who voice misgivings and distaste for events that celebrated cultures beyond the dominant cultural group in the school and held firm to the sentiment that there just is not room for these types of voices in schools. These comments started a rousing conversation in which others shared similar experiences.

This anecdote is just one of dozens. I have been invited to work on countywide projects to discuss “civility” between home and school, as well as invited to discuss this topic with those in higher education and elementary and secondary education. While the conceptual nature of Inclusive Freedom is exasperating to some educators, what is clear is that school administrators have few resources when it comes to managing challenging speech from families. Administrators often lean on legal interpretations of state and federal law when considering how to manage speech. Because these standards are broad and many acknowledge the benefit of dialogue with families, the standards used to determine when speech is intolerable are blurry and inconsistently applied. Emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, this seems like a valuable starting point for how we might respond to divisive issues.

As school life “returns to normal,” however, the politicization and polarization of parent rights in schools persist. An analysis of citizen partisanship across a selection of countries over the last four decades found that in the US, the rise in polarization was the steepest.²⁷ In the wake of George Floyd’s murder, statehouses took up the task of legislating “divisive topics” out of classrooms. At the same time, politicians began stumping for “parent rights” in education, pointing to indoctrination as a rallying point for concerned parents. The associated rise of groups like *Moms for Liberty*, a conservative group with over two hundred chapters and enough fundraising prowess to endorse school board members across the country, along with Glenn Youngkin’s successful campaign for Governor of Virginia which centered “parent rights” in education in its

²⁶ Hadley F. Bachman and Barbara J. Boone, “A Multi-Tiered Approach to Family Engagement,” *Educational Leadership* 80, no. 1 (2022): 58-62.

²⁷ Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M. Shapiro, “Cross-country trends in affective polarization,” *Review of Economics and Statistics* (2022): 1-60.

platform, have stirred families to engage with their schools from these politicized positions.²⁸

This enflamed partisanship has led to conflict. Responses from school officials have ranged from heavy-handed, pressing charges against protesters²⁹ and adjusting policies for public comment in public meetings,³⁰ to more passive, allowing meetings and protests to devolve into nothing more than shouting. All these factors complicate the already tenuous relationship between schools and families. Though the current climate may cause dismay, families being engaged in the education of their children is not a bad thing. Effective home-school partnerships can have a positive effect on student outcomes.³¹ Correspondingly, students spend most of their time outside of school. It is thus in the interest of all, especially students, that the relationship between home and school is productive. For these reasons, situating Inclusive Freedom as a conceptual starting point for how schools invite and manage family speech seems promising and sustainable.

INCLUSIVE FREEDOM IN SCHOOLS

So far, I have described Inclusive Freedom and how it addresses questions regarding expression and inclusion on the college campus. There is also evidence that managing speech between families and schools is a priority concern for many school administrators. Inclusive Freedom offers administrators a standard that is consistent with their legal obligations to assess controversial speech by centering the impact of that speech on the receivers of it. This should illustrate how Inclusive Freedom might serve as a useful starting point from which to work when it comes to discussions of divisive family-school interactions, especially for its promise to promote dignitary safety.

Undoubtedly, a college's values and nature are significantly different than that of a school. That stated, Ben-Porath's point that the broad promotion of speech is supportive of the pursuit of values and consistent with the nature of the college campus provides a test for applicability of Inclusive Freedom to family-school interactions. Considering that different schools develop unique sets of values, and society at large does not agree about the aims of education (or which should be prioritized and when), it is difficult to generalize school-based values past broad strokes like learning and human development. Ben-Porath does offer an interpretation of dignitary safety, which seems like an ascribable value for schools to explore; however, it is unlikely that this is currently championed by many schools. These values may not apply to families when they engage with

²⁸ Rachel Cohen, "How education culture wars have shaped the midterms," *Vox*, November 4, 2022.

²⁹ Danika Fears, Danika, "Parent Arrested at Out-of-Control School Board Meeting on News Trans Policy," *The Daily Beast*, June 23, 2021.

³⁰ Madeline Mitchell, "Judge: Lakota must allow public comment despite school board vote to suspend it," *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 17, 2022.

³¹ Epstein et al., 2018; Galindo & Sheldon, 2012.

their child's school, but both parties desire the pursuit of these values for their children. Further, a school's unique position in the community requires negotiation and collaboration with students, families, and community members to design and enact an education program that brings these values to life. Inclusive freedom seems to be in service of these ends.

Reflecting on the nature of institutions, Ben-Porath rightly points out that college campuses are unique in that they are both educational and civic. Thinking about family-school interactions, schools are certainly civic spaces. By prioritizing access in concert with broad promotion of expression, Inclusive Freedom seems to support the civic nature of family-school interactions. Schools, however, are also educational in nature. Considering this specific space between schools and families, it is important to note that the nature of these exchanges will not be regularly educative. There is, however, an exchange between parties that seems to benefit from the broad promotion of free speech. In this way, applying Inclusive Freedom in these interactions is desirable to ensure that nondominant family voices are raised, those injured by speech can respond, and so as much information as possible can be exchanged between parties.

The values and nature of schools seem to be supported by Inclusive Freedom, especially when placed in the context of their communities. The demographics and commitments of groups within a given geography evolve over time, and schools are often inclined to deliver education programs that are reflective of community interests. Knowing that the concept, family engagement in education, is growing increasingly politicized and partisan, schools undoubtedly become spaces for divisive conversations to emerge. While the two principles of Inclusive Freedom provide clear guideposts for policy and practice, a focus on ensuring dignitary safety to the greatest degree possible can be what directs policies to both invite speech and be inclusive. By centering dignitary safety as a school value and informing policies with dignitary safety at the center, a culture and context emerges from which educators, as well as families harmed by speech, can respond from a transparent, legitimate, and explicit position. School policies on family-school interaction that have an explicit emphasis on creating conditions for dignitary safety to be experienced by as many families as possible will guide schools towards achieving Inclusive Freedom, while drawing a clearer line for what will be and will not be acceptable in family-school interactions. Additionally, leading with dignitary safety helps to ensure that schools are not overlooking underlying commitments of families and communities that may not be as obvious as skin color. Considering the rise in family-school engagement, including viewpoints seen as controversial, leveraging a framework for Inclusive Freedom guided by dignitary safety is a strong conceptual starting point to ensure inclusive, open, and generative family-school discourse.

CONCLUSION

Family-school engagement is a topic top of mind for many educators. The past few years have provided myriad examples illustrating the undesirable results when schools do not have an effective means for managing controversial speech from families. We cannot shy away from these interactions. Thinking deeply and evolving our understanding of family voice, collaboration, and leadership in schools is necessary for maximizing school success. Evidence from peer-reviewed literature indicates that strong family engagement practices in school benefits students, school staff, and families. While the current perceived rise in family-school interactions can be traced to politics and polarization, schools have always had a responsibility to be responsive to the desires of the families they serve and the communities in which they are situated.

In response to discussions with educators regarding challenges managing controversial speech from families, I offer Ben-Porath's framework for Inclusive Freedom as a conceptual starting point and dignitary safety as a new value to shape with their larger school communities. While I understand the response of outright dismissal when it comes to the controversial speech of a single family or minority of families, responding in this way does not resolve any grievance. Looking back on videos of angry parents being arrested at school board meetings, I often wonder not just about that parent or guardian who now has an irreparable relationship with the school, but all the families that see this action taken and how they are affected by it. No matter what side of a disagreement we might take up, the effects of a public clash will ripple across families and not disintegrate quickly. At the same time, school administrators cannot be paralyzed by these interactions. Using the concept of dignitary safety as the threshold for the type of speech that will be tolerated between families and schools, while simultaneously grounding policy and practice in Inclusive Freedom, allows for growth, provides a path which keeps doors open for trust to be established, and allows for a vision of partnership to persist even when intense disagreements arise.

Guidance is needed on responding to charged family-school interactions. Families will always have an interest in the education of their children and schools will always be faced with how to manage these expressions in a variety of contexts. Policies should already be in place speaking to family-school interactions, and more educators should be receiving professional learning on family engagement and related areas; however, Ben-Porath's work on Inclusive Freedom and dignitary harm provide specific resources for re-envisioning policies and practices that are responsive to the emerging context in which families and schools interact. Inclusive Freedom can inform how school leaders seriously consider families' diverse viewpoints, including those that are controversial, while maintaining a publicly legitimate position from which to respond.
