

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Coming of Age in Polarized Times

Teaching Civil Discourse
in a Digital Era

WINTER 2026

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Teens and emerging adults are coming of age in information environments defined by speed and polarization. Social media feeds shape what they see, hear, and understand about contentious issues—often, long before they are able to make sense of it all.

Or Initiative was founded in this context. In this first year, we listened to what these challenges feel like to young people, their educators, and curriculum and edtech creators. This report shares what we learned. We examine what we and the field can do to make classrooms spaces where young people can develop a shared, robust evidence base on a tough topic and use it to practice civil discourse with their peers.

Our initial case study is the Middle East conflict—specifically, the aftermath of October 7 and the subsequent war in Gaza. We chose this issue because of its urgency and complexity, and because it has become a deep fault line in American public life. We use the conflict as a window into a broader generational condition, and to ask:

- How are teens learning to make sense of contentious issues in algorithmically-driven digital spaces?
- What role are schools playing—or not playing—in helping them process those issues?
- How can curriculum and educator supports be designed to meet this moment?

Or Initiative's name reflects this approach: an emphasis on alternatives to either/or thinking, and the Hebrew word for "light." Our mission is to help young people and the adults around them see beyond binaries, to deeply understand serious issues, and to seek to understand how they affect others with empathy, curiosity, and respect.

I. What We Did

In 2025, our team conducted three strands of inquiry:

- 1 **Student interviews** with 8th and 11th graders in Orange County (Southern California) and New York City across independent, public, and Jewish Day schools.
- 2 **Educator interviews** with 8th and 11th grade classroom teachers, school leaders, curriculum directors, and technology coordinators.
- 3 **Curriculum landscape** review of what is being used in middle and high schools across the United States to cover one or more of three domains: digital, information, or media literacy, civil discourse and dialogue skills, and teaching about the Middle East conflict or Israeli–Palestinian story.

We learned a great deal but are mindful of the limits of this early evidence. Our findings are illustrative, not representative. Students in coastal communities cannot stand for young people across the U.S. and in the next phase of work, we will expand into regions with different demographics and cultural histories—including a priority on including more Muslim and Arab student voices—to ensure that our approach can resonate nationally.

II. What We Learned from Students

1 **Teens live inside highly personalized, algorithmically-mediated feeds** that learn their preferences and push them toward particular content. Their feeds are where they primarily encounter contentious issues in simplified, decontextualized ways.

- They describe “hacking” their feeds—blocking accounts, saving favored creators, or intentionally liking content “on both sides” to see a range of posts. But they also want their feeds to be fun, so they curate accordingly.
- They characterize scrolling through footage of October 7 and two years of war in Gaza as overwhelming; filled with graphic images and emotionally charged narratives that make it hard to know what is real.

2 **Teens’ traditional media literacy skills are no match for digital environments** where teens encounter fleeting clips ill-suited to strategies that assume information is stable, comparable, and verifiable.

- Many teens felt that “nothing is true”: every source has an agenda and every claim can be contradicted by an equally confident counterclaim. They see extreme content getting engagement and moderates being drowned out.
- In response, some teens rely on a “majority rules” approach: if they see the same content repeated, they are more likely to believe it is true.

3 **They see classrooms as one of—or the only—remaining places where they can ask questions, change their minds, and see peers do the same.**

- They know it takes courage for teachers to broach tough topics, and value structured conversations that slow reactions and insist on a shared evidence base.
- Students notice when teachers avoid discussion or allow conversations initially but cut it off abruptly, leaving them feeling more anxious and confused than before.

III. What We Learned from Educators

1 **Educators have a strong desire to engage, and real fears of doing harm.** Most educators we spoke with want to help students talk about tough topics like the Middle East conflict. Many see it as core to their professional responsibilities. But they also describe:

- Fears of being perceived as biased or politically motivated.
- Unclear guidance from school leaders and potential pressure from parents.
- Limited professional development and bandwidth to design and facilitate high-quality discussions.

2 **They view classrooms as both a refuge and a pressure cooker.** Like students, educators view classrooms as precious space for young people to engage difficult issues. But they also described feeling pressured to spend time meeting academic standards, to respect a wide range of family beliefs, and to avoid becoming the next viral controversy.

Many teachers tried to create “small sanctuaries” within these constraints with episodic lessons that allow for reflection and dialogue. Without institutional backing and coherent curricular support, these efforts are isolated and fragile.

3 **Educators see real gaps between students’ digital realities and available curricular tools,** particularly:

- Digital literacy lessons that still assume students primarily encounter information through websites and search engines, not short-form video or AI-generated content.
- Lessons on the Middle East that may be historically rich but are not attuned to the images and narratives students encounter daily in their feeds.
- Teachers asked for tools to help them better bridge between what teens learn in digital environments and in their classrooms.

IV. What We Learned from the Curriculum Landscape

Our review of 84 curricular efforts revealed considerable energy and expertise, as well as profound fragmentation.

1 **What the field is already doing, often quite well:** We found strong work on civil discourse and discussion skills, digital literacy and information evaluation, and content about the Middle East conflict.

- 2 **What is largely missing is integration.** Very few resources bring all three domains together so that teens can develop digital knowledge and civil discourse skills grounded in learning about a particular social issue. An integrated approach would more closely mimic how young people encounter (mis)information in their everyday lives, making the skills they earn more relevant and applicable to future experiences.

V. The Or Challenge: Building Civil Discourse in a Digital Age

Our first year of listening has sharpened, challenged, and refined our initial thinking.

It has led us to a core conviction: To support young people in a polarized, digital world, we must integrate how they develop capabilities to

- Navigate digital environments effectively;
- Consolidate a robust evidence base on a complex topic; and
- Engage each other in civil discourse on that topic, face-to-face.

The Or Initiative’s emerging approach is guided by several commitments:

- **A youth-first, asset-based lens** that starts from what teens currently think, do, and feel, to develop learning tools to effectively generate students’ curiosity and confidence to learn deeply about a complex topic.
- We take **a developmentally staged approach to civil discourse**, thinking about what 8th graders, 11th graders, and undergraduates can learn to do. Our throughline approach treats young people as capable of being serious actors and seeks to build on their skills over time.
- A commitment to **shared evidence as foundational for a shared reality**. In a fractured media environment, we must reestablish the importance of an evidence base that enables young people to learn to analyze and deliberate together.
- We view digital tools **as integral for skills development, if they are built to prioritize young people’s needs**. How can generative AI, built with and for teens, bring current events into the classroom to help them develop skills in resonant ways? We intend to find out.

We begin with the Middle East conflict precisely because it is so hard. If we can help young people engage on this issue effectively and empathetically, we believe we can adapt the Or approach to other complex topics, from social media and youth wellbeing, to climate change.



VI. An Invitation and a Challenge to the Field

The work we describe is demanding. It asks more of schools when they are already stretched, and more of educators who often feel exposed and under-supported. But the alternative—leaving young people alone with algorithmically amplified extremes and a growing sense that “nothing is true”—is unacceptable.

We see this report **as both a map of the current terrain and an invitation** to co-create what comes next.

- For **educators and school leaders**: treat classrooms as civic spaces and invest in integrated approaches to content, digital literacy, and discourse.
- For **curriculum developers**: strengthen and connect existing efforts across domains.
- For **philanthropies and research partners**: invest in field-level infrastructure rather than isolated pilots.
- For **technology companies**: recognize that young people already live in your systems—and design for their flourishing.

The Or Initiative is in its infancy, but it is not starting from scratch. We build on decades of scholarship and practice in youth civic engagement, digital media, and education—work that our team members have all been part of shaping.

Our invitation is simple: join us in helping to make classrooms into places where young people learn to pursue strong evidence, and to hold more than one truth at a time; to speak across differences without damaging their relationships; and to navigate their digital worlds with discernment, confidence, and care.



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