

Coming of Age in Polarized Times

Teaching Civil Discourse
in a Digital Era

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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.

I. INTRODUCTION

In an age defined by polarization and digital distraction, perhaps the only thing we can all agree on is this: technology is profoundly reshaping what—and how—teens learn.

Adolescence is a period of intense social, cognitive, and physical development. For teens, those processes are unfolding amid rapid technological and cultural change. They came of age during a global pandemic that left many people more isolated and more reliant on digital tools. The societal fractures that were already shaping American life became even more polarized post-pandemic, supercharged by a range of issues that many of the adults around them can no longer discuss in civil ways.

These conditions have made in-person social engagement more challenging for the next generation. There are fewer spaces outside of school for interaction, limiting opportunities to practice social skills and build relationships across differences, including with peers within shared identity groups who hold different opinions. The challenges of in-person engagement are contrasted by their easy access to virtual communities and social media, which feel simpler to navigate but often contribute to feelings of isolation. These dynamics constrain opportunities to practice constructive dialogue and build social trust.

Teens are also growing up in an era where information is abundant but knowledge is harder to achieve. Hours spent on social media expose them to content that is difficult—often impossible—to verify, in environments where information is ephemeral, not durable. Unlike a book or an article, posts disappear into the scroll, making it hard to return to sources, compare claims over time, or understand how ideas evolve. Algorithmic personalization further fragments experience: teens know their feeds differ from their peers', which erodes shared reference points for current events and social issues.

In these fractured environments, teens are navigating information, misinformation, and impassioned hot takes. And yet, studies consistently show that most young people do not hold extreme positions on social issues. In fact, they often believe that their peers are more politically extreme than they actually are.¹ While many care deeply about social and political issues, polling shows a widening gap between young people's investments in issues and their sense of civic efficacy and of institutional trust.^{2,3} Some young people become intensely activated; others disengage entirely. Post-pandemic, teens struggle to discuss polarizing topics with peers, resulting in intractable conflict or silence.^{4,5} A growing share of teens and young adults doubt that Americans can find common ground at all.⁶

But here is a paradox: **Young people's pessimism is fertile ground for renewal—if we meet it with purpose.**

Or Initiative's Story

Or Initiative was founded in 2025 to respond to challenges that are both widespread and acute. The initiative is led by a team of university researchers, curriculum designers, middle and high school educators, digital media makers, and policy experts with decades of experience on how technology shapes the development of children, teens, and emerging adults. Across sectors, we have been working for years on how to foster the forms of connection that help young people thrive.

Our new mission crystallized after October 7, 2023, when Hamas attacked communities in Southern Israel, massacring more than 1,300 people and taking 250 more as hostages. The global response—amplified on social media, including by the perpetrators—began immediately. It escalated further when the war between Israel and Hamas began in Gaza three weeks later. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is hardly the first contentious political issue this generation has encountered; they have come of age amid major youth mobilizations around climate change, gun violence, racial justice, and gender affirmation.

Even those of us who study such mobilizations were shaken by what unfolded: a sharp surge in antisemitism from extremists on both the political right and left; denial of the October 7 atrocities, of the suffering and existence of hostages, and of a nation's right to self-defense; and Jewish college students barred from libraries and classrooms because administrators could not guarantee their safety. At the same time, social media amplified a small minority of activists whose actions were antisemitic, unfairly coloring perceptions of the far larger group protesting the pervasive suffering of Gazan civilians and a grinding, brutal war, including deportations of activists exercising their free speech rights. Across these months, public and digital discourse flattened complex grief into competing certainties and pressed young people to pick a side.

Amid this rancor, what has been most absent is what the moment most requires: slowing the speed of assumption and engaging complexity, not collapsing into binaries. Public discourse frames the conflict as “pro-Palestine” versus “pro-Israel.” But issues as enduring as the Middle East conflict cannot be reduced to two positions—especially given the diverse histories, identities, and moral commitments that Americans bring to engaging with it. Like many pressing social issues, understanding this conflict demands holding multiple truths at once and tolerating the discomfort that results from doing so.

We began with informed hunches about how teens were navigating this moment, but we did not want to assume the contours of either the problem or the path forward. So we started by listening, using the post-October 7 period as a high-stakes case that might reveal a broader generational condition. We interviewed undergraduates about how they made sense of

the conflict and what evidence they trusted. We examined how social media shaped their interpretations of events—and of each other. And we looked for assets, not just fractures. When we found pairs of young people who could sustain evidence-based conversations across real disagreement, we interviewed them together to understand how they did it and what their strengths might teach the adults designing for them.⁷

What emerged was hopeful. It became clear that young people are hungry for environments that establish clear guardrails for discussion, insist on a shared evidence base, and provide routine interactions with the same group of peers as a learning community.

WHAT THEY WERE LOOKING FOR, IT TURNS OUT, WERE CLASSROOMS.

“Or” signals the middle ground between extremes—a commitment to generating evidence-driven alternatives to oversimplified framings. It is an insistence that young people deserve opportunities to wrestle with complexity and to learn to engage with each other effectively and empathetically when they disagree. “Or” is also the Hebrew word for light. Our goal is to illuminate new forms of connectivity—between young people, and between generations, by opening up ways for young people to engage their teachers, parents, and other adults who invest in how they grow.

We chose the name to hold two meanings at once: **the courage of the in-between, and the clarity that evolves from complexity instead of simplification.**

In the most connected age that humanity has ever known, we are doubling down on the forms of connection that matter most: the magic that happens when a classroom becomes a community and when peers reach new understandings of complex issues, becoming more fully known to each other through authentic engagement and productive disagreement.

What We Learned This Year

Building on our earlier research with college students, our first year focused on defining the most impactful contributions Or Initiative can make for middle and high school students and their educators. We concentrated on 8th and 11th graders because these are transition points—moments when young people are especially open to new ideas, as they move from middle to high school and begin seriously evaluating postsecondary options.

This report presents what we learned. We interviewed 52 8th and 11th graders, along with educators and school administrators, across independent, public, and Jewish day schools in Orange County, California, and New York City. We also reviewed 84 curricular offerings

currently used in middle and high schools nationwide to understand where Or Initiative can best meet educators' needs.

We learned a great deal, but we are mindful of what we did not. These findings are illustrative rather than representative—an initial evidence base that reflects Or's approach: youth-centered, evidence-driven, and examining multiple positions on a complex challenge to understand before acting. We recognize, for example, that students on the coasts cannot stand in for those in the communities between them. We plan to expand our learning into additional regions and communities with different demographic makeups as we build tools intended to resonate with young people across the country.

We begin with a contentious issue that is both urgent and unusually difficult: the Middle East conflict and how it shapes Americans' treatment of one another. If we can develop resources that help young people engage this topic with evidence, context, and care, we can apply and adapt the Or approach to other issues, learning along the way what is transferable versus issue-specific about our approach.

Classrooms as Civic Spaces

In an era of extreme polarization and social distrust, educators face real challenges to schools being the spaces young people need to develop their civil and civic muscles. They may lack confidence to teach tough topics and facilitate potentially fractious discussions. Their pre-service training likely did not include fostering these pedagogical skills. They also feel constrained by perceived political and professional risks related to addressing contentious topics in class, even though they want to help students develop civil discourse skills. Parents have also become more vocal and involved in determining what is taught in their children's schools, adding additional pressure to teachers' decisions.

For all of these reasons, we believe it is protective—not risky—for teachers to hew to a vetted curriculum rather than assembling high-stakes materials themselves from disparate sources. Teachers also need to be in community with each other to be courageous. Building educator learning communities within and across schools can increase their confidence and capabilities to provide classroom experiences that students are craving.

There are also important, unresolved questions about technology's role in such classroom experiences. Not all technologies are learning enhancements, and not every innovation belongs in every classroom setting. A laptop can be a powerful tool for collaborative writing, but can also be a barrier to being fully present during a hard conversation. Generative AI can be a helpful assistant when young people know enough to recognize its hallucinations, but it cannot replace the work of developing the knowledge needed to recognize that hallucination. As with all communication technologies—from the printing press to the podcast—the tools must fit the task.

Learning also means learning how to change. Change requires friction of thought; a wrestling match between competing ideas. A commitment to a process of inquiry and where it leads, including revisiting assumptions and unexamined beliefs. This is why the best classrooms become communities of inquiry. Shared spaces where students grapple with difficult texts, connect ideas, and move from opinions to informed judgments. Just as crucially, they are opportunities to grapple with stances students do not support. This is more than pedagogy. It is a democratic practice.

Or Initiative plans to connect what is pressing in the national agenda and in teens' feeds to what they learn and apply in their classrooms—connections that help young people develop skills that in time, become durable habits. By reinforcing skills into habits that are sustained across issues and across home, school, and social settings, we can help make those habits “sticky.”

Adolescence is a period of intense development: of physical growth, independent identity formation, abstract thinking, increased peer influence, and greater risk-taking. This is the ideal developmental phase to make it easier for young people to assert that they are the kind of person who takes their time before deciding where they stand on an issue; who is open to new, high-quality evidence and arguments; and who can listen with respect and curiosity to views that are different from their own. This is hardly a new idea: it was Aristotle who observed, “It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.”

If Or Initiative can make a meaningful contribution to these habits of mind—and habits of heart—for this generation, we will have succeeded. Young people are not problems to be solved. They are our partners in building a more civil, thoughtful, and connected society.

So we listened. First to young people—because their digital lives are environments in which they are building knowledge, identity, and belonging. Then, we listened to educators—because classrooms are where students told us the counterweight must be, and teachers are being asked to hold that line with insufficient support.

The next section of the report shares what we learned about how teens are navigating algorithmic, AI-mediated information ecosystems; how those conditions are shaping their willingness and ability to talk across difference; and what they are asking classrooms to become for them.

II. WHAT WE LEARNED FROM MIDDLE & HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Between May and November 2025, we interviewed 52 8th and 11th-grade students in Southern California (SoCal) and New York City (NYC) across independent, selective public, and Jewish Day schools, focusing on transitional school years that mark heightened openness to new ideas. The sections that follow trace how teens make sense of information, disagreement, and belonging online—and what the implications are for classroom-based civic learning.

Social Media Platforms are Complex Places for Teens

Young people’s reflections on how they feel about social media reveal intertwined positive and negative experiences, because social media is not just one thing to them. These platforms are lifelines to friends, sources of laughter and learning, and a mirror of society’s cruelty and excesses. The emotional landscape of social media is layered and complicated; a space of possibility and a site of tension.

Teens emphasized that spending time on their chosen platforms feels fun. They enjoy content that reflects their interests and maintain deep connections to friends via their apps. Many felt, contrary to the current social discourse, that spending time on social media reduces their anxiety and offers a welcome escape from the stressors of their everyday lives.

While some students, like Leora, see social media as spaces for disconnection and relaxation, others turn to their apps for deep connection and social networking. Olive, an 11th grader in SoCal, said she has “a lot of deep, one-on-one conversations with friends” on social media and views it as a primary way to maintain connections with them.

When it came to negative aspects of social media, many teens shared the “addictive” nature of their experiences. They talked about feeling like they needed to engage in “continuous video scrolling,” even when videos are of little to no interest. Multiple teens noticed this dependence most clearly while on vacations that should have disconnected them from their usual routines.

“For me, social media is a way to decompress. It’s a good distraction because I get really high anxiety and that’s what I’ve found social media does; it’s a good way to get your mind off things.”

– Leora, 11th grade, SoCal

When I Use Social Media I feel..



8th graders select up to three words to describe their feelings about social media in a focus group in NYC. Photo credit: Barry Joseph

Teens also navigate emotional whiplash as they toggle between humor and harm in social media feeds. They recounted trying to make sense of serious events when their online platforms encourage reactions that are ironic or detached, rather than reflective and empathetic. Many young people we spoke with noted that the acidic language used online was not how people interacted in person, making digital spaces a unique aspect of their social lives.

“People would never say that to my face in person, but on the screen, they have the confidence to be rude.”

– Ava, 11th grade, NYC

While teens view their social media experiences as being multifaceted, they are certain that parents and teachers see them much more simply—and negatively. Our interviews reveal that they are absorbing the message that adults view their digital experiences as a waste of time at best, and as detrimental to their development, at worst. This disconnect matters because several teens said that when they encounter difficult or disturbing content, they opt not to ask adults for help because they expect to be met with criticism or tech restrictions instead.

Social Media as a News Source

National surveys indicate that most teens visit social media sites many times daily, and about one-third say they are connected to social media almost constantly.⁶ They may not go to social media for news, but they passively encounter news there, sandwiched between other forms of content in their feeds. Social media is often their primary source of news—a troubling reality, since reliance on social media is associated with being less informed about current events and being more familiar with conspiracy theories, than Americans with more varied, less social media-reliant news diets.¹¹

Young people we spoke with describe seeing multiple reels, videos, and comments about major news events right after they happen—well before they heard about them from a parent, teacher, or other trusted adult. The immediacy of content delivery results in teens encountering violence, war, and death in short-format videos with no context or warning.

“When the Gaza war first started, there were horrible videos full of all the stuff that you didn’t want to see. Unfortunately, I saw. There’s a lot of graphic images; they don’t censor anything. I saw a lot of people being injured, a lot of malnourishment and air strikes.”

– Daniela, 11th grade, SoCal

"I wouldn't have learned about Charlie Kirk if it wasn't for YouTube. That really took a toll. When he was assassinated, I was crying. It was so sad. Even me talking about it right now, I'm about to cry."

– Max, 8th grade, SoCal

"In 90 seconds, the room transformed from kids chatting over their meals to a wave of everyone being on their phones, watching the video of Charlie Kirk dying ...

Teachers get trained for active shooter drills; no one is trained for how to manage their next [class] period when students have just witnessed someone dying online."

– High school administrator, SoCaL

Max, an 8th grader from SoCal, described learning about the murder of Charlie Kirk, the robbery of crown jewels from the Louvre, and the government shutdown, online first.

Charlie Kirk's assassination was an example of just how quickly graphic news content can reach young people. An administrator at one of the SoCal schools where we conducted interviews described the surreal experience of being in the lunchroom that day.

Kirk's assassination was headline news, making it more likely that teachers and parents would invite conversations with teens about what they had seen and how to think about it. Teens often encounter distressing content that affects them deeply but does not dominate the headlines, and they seldom disclose for fear of having their devices restricted or taken away entirely.

Young People Have Substantial Algorithmic Awareness

An under-appreciated asset is how much teens know about algorithms and how much thought they put into curating their feeds. We spoke with young people who demonstrated deep understanding of why specific content appears in their feeds and how their interactions with content shapes what they see in the future. Their levels of awareness surpass that of many adults; Pew reports that a substantial share of adults do not understand how social media news feeds deliver content¹² Teens are often competent, intentional, and capable managers of their digital experiences.

Their algorithmic awareness does not translate into confidence about what is true. Many understand how content reaches them, but **knowing that their feeds are curated, both by the social media algorithm itself and by their own behavior, often heightened, rather than reduced, teens' information skepticism.**

Despite this uncertainty, most young people described how they deliberately ensure their feeds deliver the content they want by interacting with what they like, and by skipping or blocking what they don't.

The curation efforts that teens described raise important questions about how, and whether, they encounter differences online. Platforms respond to carefully managed engagement by narrowing the range of what users see; teens narrow it further still by primarily interacting with content they find comfortable and affirming.

"The algorithm does know me, and it gives me a feed I really enjoy."

– Naomi, 8th grade, NYC

Key Finding: Teens' Digital Agency is a (Largely) Untapped Asset

What young people learn online is shaped by the speed and certainty of the content they encounter. But they are also active participants and are often deeply reflective about their digital experiences.

"There are a lot of bots and people who, like, rage bait with wild statements. So you just have to think: is this actually someone saying this because they believe this? Will my commenting or interacting with this help at all? If it won't, I move on."

– Lila, 8th grade, NYC

"I get a lot of my news from social media... if I read something and I'm like, 'Oh, this is interesting,' then I look it up because I want to make sure I'm learning things that are real and true. A lot of what I've learned about Israel and Palestine has been shaped by social media."

– Drew, 11th grade, NYC

Teens bring real strengths to how they manage their digital lives. Our challenge is to make those assets a springboard into a deeper, broader knowledge base and to connect those assets more effectively to what teens learn in school.

In *Behind Their Screens*, Emily Weinstein and Carrie James of Project Zero at Harvard University observe that teens' feeds are shaped by what they choose to engage with and by "the opaque logic of recommendation systems" which quickly adapt, learn, and reinforce habits. They describe how many teens recognize that "their feeds become echo chambers" due to these interactions between system constraints and their own choices.⁵

"I save a bit of everything: things I like, things I hate... to try to make it so my feed shows a bit more of each [side].... If it's something that I personally don't agree with, I'll save it anyways because [engaging that content means the algorithm] is going to show me more from the other point of view."

– Andrew, 11th grade, SoCal

Curating Algorithmic Bubbles

Teens are regularly confronted with content they find disturbing or distasteful. Elena, an 8th grader in NYC, recalled when her feed flooded with Andrew Tate content, which she actively dislikes and yet could not seem to escape. Others, in trying to remove unwanted content, had the algorithm interpret their actions as engagement, filling their feeds with unwanted posts. "Cleaning up" feeds was, teens asserted, hard work.

Teens we interviewed recognize that the byproduct of their curation is limiting their exposure to viewpoints different from their own. They wrestled with how to stay informed about other perspectives while still keeping their feeds enjoyable and fun. Some took a different approach by purposely interacting with content they disagreed with, to try to ensure different viewpoints in their feeds.

Teens demonstrated a clear awareness of how algorithms shape what they see and a strong desire to resist being trapped in one-sided echo chambers. They want to make their own choices, rather than having an algorithm push a particular viewpoint. Their actions revealed a persistent tension: they want access to diverse perspectives, particularly on contentious issues, but also want to avoid being surprised by upsetting or intentionally inflammatory content.

Many Young People Believe That Nothing Online Is True

Many teens explained that they approach online content from an assumption that nothing they encounter online can be presumed to be reliable. They are in good company with American adults in that regard, especially those whose information environments are largely online.¹³

This deep skepticism was well articulated by Caleb, who tries not to be persuaded by online content. When we asked how he determines if something he sees is true or false, he replied: “You can’t. It’s hard.” **This exchange highlights the troubling dynamic that emerged in many of our interviews: young people distrust the information they encounter in digital spaces—and they do not have confidence that there is a dependable way for them to separate reliable evidence from misinformation.**

Key Finding: Traditional Media Literacy Skills Fall Short in Digital Settings

Teens have been taught traditional media literacy skills: rely on experts, deconstruct messages, and evaluate sources. These skills are mismatched with digital environments where sources are hard to verify, expertise is contested, and content is hard (or impossible) to relocate.

“I feel almost like any social media platform—even with really aggressive moderation—is always going to have misinformation on it. Like, that is a fundamental thing: if you let people without credentials say anything about any topic, there will be misinformation.”

– Miriam, 8th grade, NYC

Teens deal with these challenges with strategies like majority rules (see page 23). Sometimes it works; sometimes it doesn’t. They deserve opportunities to develop digital skills that are a match for the information environments where they need them.

Several participants were even more disillusioned than Caleb; they not only doubted whether they could determine what is true, but whether objective truth exists at all.

“I just try not to change my mind, because I know like there’s a lot of stuff online that’s not true. The internet is just whatever people want to put on it, and a lot of times, it’s false information.”

– Caleb, 8th grade, SoCal

“If I feel like I’m not sure if something in a video [about the war in Gaza] is real or not, I’ll just skip it and then see if it comes up again. Then if it does come up again, then I’ll believe in it.”

– Lena, 8th grade, SoCal

“It’s very hard to come across what information is actually true because I don’t think anyone really knows.”

– Daniella, 11th grade, SoCal

“I look up the topic [in my web browser]... and I’ll go down a few more to find a trustable source. Then I, like, scan through the article or website until I can get my answer.... If I find more than one source and if they all agree on the same thing, then I would think that’s more reputable.”

– Arjun, 8th grade, NYC

And yet, a small number of interviewed teens offered excellent strategies they use to navigate uncertain information environments, including leaving social media apps to search for other sources of information to evaluate a claim (i.e., lateral reading) and evaluating source quality.

Growing up in a world with less shared consensus on even basic facts is a profoundly destabilizing information environment. As Mike Caulfield and Sam Wineburg argue in *Verified*, traditional media literacy skills are poorly suited to the rapidly evolving digital information environments where students try to apply them.¹⁴

“I didn’t believe the Elon Musk salute was real at first. I thought: no way it’s real; this is AI.... But then I saw more videos of it, so I knew it actually is real.”

– Amy, 11th grade, SoCal

“If two or more posts say the same thing then I find it credible. I just do a majority vote. If most posts are saying this, but one says the other thing, I just lean into the majority.”

– Adriana, 8th grade, SoCal

Majority Rules

Caulfield and Wineburg argue that traditional media literacy strategies often feel irrelevant and insufficient because they assume a level of trust and shared understanding that no longer exists for teens online. A number of teens in SoCal filled this gap in a specific way: when they cannot determine what is trustworthy online, they look for repetition. Sometimes, the “majority rules” is right (as it was for Amy), and many times, it is not.

Teens who use this “majority rules” technique are making an earnest attempt to apply a foundational media literacy principle: when multiple sources are in agreement, the claim is more likely to be true. But algorithmic tracking in social media environments not only makes this strategy unreliable—it actually increases the chances of accepting misinformation as true.

The Post-October 7 Experience: A Confluence of These Digital Dynamics for Teens

Relentless videos of grief and destruction have infused young people’s feeds since October 7, 2023. Livestreamed violence was a hallmark of Hamas’ strategy that day. They posted children reacting to their parents’ murders on Facebook Live and the terror of hostages being abducted into Gaza on Telegram.

The ensuing devastation of the war in Gaza has been the first “social media war” for most

American teens. When Vietnam became the first televised war, it came into people's living rooms, not their pockets. The nightly news created a collective experience for families and a basis for discussions with others the next day. That experience no longer exists. Young people know they are having a personalized experience on their phones and that no two feeds are alike. And instead of war content being contained to an evening broadcast, violent videos come unvarnished in the two minutes teens scroll between class periods.

Teens' descriptions of the post-October 7 period revealed wide disparities in awareness and impact. Milo, an 11th grader from SoCal, said: "I don't even know what you're asking about when you say October 7," whereas Amy, an 11th grader at another SoCal school, recalled arriving at school in tears on October 9.

For Jewish teens, the digital environment did not just inform an understanding of a distant geopolitical conflict; their social media platforms became an immediate, deeply intimate space where their identities, safety, and sense of belonging were called into question. And it seemed like everyone had an opinion, from friends and relatives to content creators who took extreme positions.

Social media was where many teens first heard about October 7 and the war that followed. Drew, a Jewish 11th grader in NYC, described the days after October 7 as "an awakening, a turning point for me."

The rapid flow of graphic war content, much of which was under-contextualized, emotionally charged, or outright untrue,¹⁵ created an atmosphere where students were simultaneously overwhelmed with content and yet still misinformed. Several teens described scrolling through a barrage of posts of Hamas' attack on October 7, and later from drone strikes in Gaza and Iran's missile strikes on Israel, taking in information and graphic visuals before the adults in their lives could help them to process it.

Edward, an 11th grader from SoCal, described seeing "videos of drone strikes and bombings," as "kind of crazy." His casual phrasing underscored how normalized such exposure has become for teens. Footage that should be shocking, disturbing, and only viewable with prior warnings has been rendered routine by the pace and volume with which it appears in social media feeds.

"I always had this really intense romanticization of Israel. I thought, I'm Jewish. Of course I'll visit Israel one day. Of course Israel is my homeland. I never thought about these things in any kind of serious way and just assumed them to be true until October 7th. In the aftermath, I really started thinking critically about it.

– Drew, 11th grade, NYC

“I care about what’s going on in Israel and Gaza and about the conflict, but I don’t want to interact with that because I don’t like having negative things on my feed. It shows up whether I want it to or not.”

– Daniella, 11th grade, SoCal

Jewish students in particular spoke passionately about feeling sucked into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on social media since October 7. They described a sense of unavoidable exposure. They are certain the algorithm “knows” that they are Jewish and that they are likely to pause on news about Israel, U.S. antisemitism, or Jewish identity.

Jewish teens were concerned about recurring antisemitic content online becoming more legitimate when liked or shared: that repetition, not accuracy, determines what their peers will accept as

true. While teens were cognizant of antisemitism circulating online, many also expressed deep concern over the suffering they saw in Gaza.

Rather than experiencing these as competing narratives, some teens we spoke with held both sets of stories at once, expressing a sense of moral responsibility to stay informed even when the content felt overwhelming. Resisting simplifying the conflict into which “side” to support by expressing distress for those harmed in both Jewish and Palestinian communities offers a reminder of the empathy and nuance teens are capable of.

Authentic Allyship and Searches for Moderation

Many Jewish teens also recounted meaningful demonstrations of allyship from non-Jewish classmates. They maintained that allyship did not have to take the form of political agreement; it was more about demonstrating care when things felt heavy or threatening. Amy, an 11th grader in Orange County, described the days following October 7 as emotionally overwhelming for classmates with family in Israel, and how touching it was that both Jewish and non-Jewish classmates rallied around those who were grieving.

While digital environments were more often described as overwhelmingly hostile, some teens recounted more supportive experiences.

Many non-Jewish teens also shared a desire for conversation around the Middle East conflict that is not dominated by extremes.

“A lot of our values overlap [as Jews and non-Jews]. Because my friends and teachers are Jewish, I want to stand with my friends.”

– Gareth, 11th grade, SoCal

Key Finding: Information Asymmetries

Young people grow up hearing that “knowledge is power”—but sometimes it isn’t. We found that kids who know more about an issue and are more closely tied to it often feel disadvantaged talking with peers who know less and are less connected to an issue. They feel these asymmetries online and in in-person conversations.

“A lot of people get information on TikTok or Instagram about the war in Gaza and Israel that’s not so accurate. And then will post things that are really reflective of misinformation that’s, like, harmful and low-key antisemitic, which I don’t appreciate. It’s also people who I’m friends with, and they would never say that to my face in person. Then on screen, they somehow have the confidence to be rude.”

– Ava, 11th grade, NYC

“People who view content, put it on their [Instagram] Story, or like that content—people tend to develop opinions based on that. Especially if that conflict is important to you, I feel like it just allows for predetermined judgments of others.”

– Arielle, 11th grade, NYC

This is why we believe that what happens in classrooms matters so much—spaces where everyone has to “do the reading” and invest in getting the facts right. Classrooms need to be the civic spaces where conversation is leveled up and evened out.

“It’s just too extreme; I can’t even form an opinion because all I see is Israel deserves to invade [Gaza] because Hamas invaded first and that Israel can’t do this because people are suffering. What’s really even happening?”

– Milo, 11th grade, SoCal

accounts demanding he take a side. “There’s only two sides [online]. You’re either pro-Israel or pro-Palestine. But you can’t be pro-Israel while believing that Israel shouldn’t bomb Palestine and you can’t be pro-Palestine if you don’t support the [Hamas] regime. You have to just be one thing or another.”

Milo’s reflection underlines a challenge that was common to many teens we spoke with: an online environment has made it even feel impossible to understand the conflict even when they try. They encounter rigid ideological binaries and contradiction when they are seeking context, history, and debate.

Milo, an 11th grader from SoCal who has no ties to the region, expressed frustration that his attempts to develop a solid base of knowledge about the conflict have been challenged by

“[After October 7 on] a post about Israel, the comments were: ‘I’m not Jewish, but like, I’m in support.’ And I... was really grateful for that. It made me feel really good.”

– Naomi, 8th grade, NYC

“When I’m talking to you directly, you can’t just shut your brain off and walk away from me. You actually have to admit that you are wrong, or you have to start compromising with me.”

– Rowan, 8th grade, SoCal

Teens View Classrooms as Civil and Civic Places

Teens see social media platforms as flawed spaces for developing knowledge about complex issues. They point to the one setting in their lives where identifying high-quality evidence and engaging each other in civil debate still seems possible: the classroom.

Across interviews, students consistently contrasted the extreme, untrustworthy characteristics they associate with the online world with the stability that structured, in person class environments provide. They

Jonah: “I feel like sometimes the teacher is like, ‘Don’t be mean to each other. They shut down the argument when it’s like, getting even the slightest bit...”

Omid: ...”not all puppies and rainbows.”

– 8th graders, NYC

excitedly shared examples of times in class when teachers gave them opportunities to debate, hear from their classmates about issues that are important to them, and build connections between current events and their core subjects. Several teens said that face-to-face conversation enables a level of accountability and mutual recognition that seems impossible online.

Maya, an 8th grader from NYC, explained that she and other students want structured space to have difficult conversations, not arguments. She emphasized that she and her classmates

definitely want to know what others think about social issues, but that the correct conditions need to be in place for these explorations to be productive.

Students also had empathy for how challenging it is for their teachers to create space for civil discourse on contentious topics. Teens were aware of teachers’ trepidation about making space for discussion at all, or opting to cut discussion short to avoid disagreement.

Mindful of the challenges that educators face, students had ideas about how their teachers could foster effective conversations around challenging topics. Several emphasized that the teachers who model civil discourse best are those who create conditions of openness and respect. Jonas, an 8th grader in NYC, praised a teacher who “does a great job of allowing people to argue and disagree in a respectful way.” Likewise, Amy, an 11th grader in SoCal, said that her teacher “makes everyone feel very comfortable and doesn’t judge anyone based on their opinions.” She added that students feel comfortable in part because that teacher “shows us the other sides of the conflict... opening up the conversation to both Israeli and Palestinian [views].”

They also provided examples of times when they have seen teachers’ efforts fall short. They felt frustrated when an opportunity for real conversation presented itself but teachers made it clear that they weren’t allowed to “go there.”

“I wish that [conversations] were more open. I remember one time we were learning about a certain [historical] tariff, which is very similar to the tariff that Trump was implementing. And [my teacher] prefaced, before she taught it, saying: “I don’t want anybody to try to make a connection [to Trump] or anything.... I don’t want you to think that I, blah, blah; I just want to preface...” and kept saying stuff like that.”

– Lia, 11th grade, SoCal

Students also noted that classroom conversations about tough topics could easily be derailed by dominance of one or a few extreme voices, mimicking what happens online.

Cecilia’s frustration with a peer derailing the open conversation she and others wanted also reflects fears articulated by many educators we interviewed. Many felt underprepared and anxious at the prospect of leading discussions that felt pedagogically and politically risky.

For the young people we spoke with, classrooms are where opposing viewpoints can be shared, interrogated, and negotiated in real time without the anonymity, algorithmic sorting, and performative incentives that shape their digital environments. School is the place where not knowing the answer is okay—unlike online environments, where being unsure is perceived as weakness.

In the next section, we hear from educators about what it takes to build the classroom communities teens say they need.

“The whole reason we go to school is not to give someone your opinion, but to help them create their opinion.”

– Judah, 11th grade, SoCal

“A very, very, very pro-Israel classmate [was making it] very difficult for the teacher to lead [a discussion] because while she’s trying to not necessarily reject an opinion of a student, but make it so that everybody can feel seen, and make all opinions worthy of the time in the class.”

– Cecilia, 11th grade, SoCal

III. WHAT WE LEARNED FROM EDUCATORS: GRAPPLING WITH NEW DIGITAL REALITIES

Over the past year, we spoke with dozens of classroom educators, school leaders, curriculum designers, and others in educational spaces about how educators are navigating the issues we focus on. We also conducted 13 formal interviews with educators and school administrators working with 8th and 11th grade students in NYC and SoCal; the quotes we include from those interviews reflect the broader patterns we gleaned from formal and informal conversations. Educators are united by a deep sense of purpose: to cultivate resilience and kindness, and support students in becoming responsible members of their communities. They view social media as disruptive, and sometimes corrosive, to achieving those goals. And while they see the effects of students' social media use in schools, they express limited understanding of students' experiences in digital spaces.

Educators See Digital Experiences as Having Reshaped How Students Learn, Relate, and Make Meaning

Teachers and administrators emphasized that social media has not simply added new sources of information to their students' lives; it has fundamentally changed the conditions in which learning, investigation, and discussion take place.

Educators we spoke with pointed to a cultural shift away from shared media experiences toward highly individualized, personalized streams of content. A middle school teacher in NYC observed that downtime is now spent in individualized, digital consumption; "Kids [used to] pick up a book and just read during those empty spaces." Similarly, a high school teacher in NYC emphasized that she feels the erosion of common cultural anchors: "We used to have TV shows, movies; common ground. Now it's all micro-feeds, and the focus is on the self."

The fragmented information environment also shapes teens' engagement with current events. A school librarian in SoCal observed that students often encounter serious news in digital spaces that were designed to entertain, not inform.

"The way they would talk about [news events] sounds like memes or jokes online, versus real substantive events... they scroll past a funny video... and a very serious news event in the same feed."

– School librarian, SoCal

“What frustrates me among students and adults is an inability... for people to hold two contrasting thoughts in their head at the same time. That’s what I would really want to have there before a discussion.”

– High school administrator, NYC

Beyond current events being sandwiched between entertainment, educators worried about students’ acclimation to constructing meaning about current events via short-form, rather than long-form, content.

As one NYC high school teacher observed, teens are “wired” for instant validation achieved through likes, comments, and shares—a feedback loop that shapes not only how they engage online, but also how they participate in classroom discussions, where patience and collaboration are essential.

Educators’ accounts depicted today’s classrooms as contending with speed, fragmentation, and hyper-personalization—all conditions that complicate efforts to foster shared understanding and collective inquiry. They do not describe these changes from a place of nostalgia; rather, they are deeply concerned about how to counter students engaging each other without common frames of reference for interpreting important events.

Students’ development of critical thinking skills, as well as resilience and ethical responsibility, was core to educators’ personal missions. Teachers struggled to translate these aspirational intentions into concrete classroom pedagogy, particularly in relation to helping students navigate their digital information environments. These were especially timely dilemmas because during our data collection, New York implemented a student phone ban in schools and in California, similar legislation will be implemented soon.

“I do think we are obligated to teach them how to use [technology] appropriately [and] not just say social media is bad for you... I think this is where we—I don’t want to say fail... but I think that’s where we fail a little bit. I don’t think we’re being urgent enough.”

– High school administrator, SoCal

“My students’ news access is predicated on a shortness and a fastness and a speed that I can’t quite understand.”

– School administrator, NYC

Educators view their place as being to neither block nor embrace digital platforms; it is to train students in the critical habits that separate credible information from online noise. They emphasized the need for simple routines to help students slow down and absorb new information, and accessible strategies for vetting

sources that resonate with students and enable them to tackle complex issues. Without these resources, teachers feel a burden to improvise responses to rapid shifts in how teens learn about the world.

Teachers See Traditional Media Literacy Falling Short in Algorithmic Environments

Educators we spoke with also described a growing mismatch between traditional media literacy approaches and the realities of teens' digital information environments. Traditional media literacy models assume that information sources are discrete, identifiable, and relatively stable; as Caulfield and Wineburg compellingly argue, these assumptions do not hold for algorithmically curated feeds, where content circulates without clear attribution and is hard to relocate.¹⁴

Educators noted that students come to class with fierce convictions formed via social media exposure and without the conceptual tools to explain where the information originated or why it should be trusted. Rather than distinguishing between platform, creator, and source, students often treat social media itself as an authority, mainly because it is so integrated into their lives that it feels familiar and therefore, trustworthy.

Traditional media literacy approaches often focus on evaluating static or easily retrievable texts. What educators say they lack, and urgently need, are curricular tools that help students interrupt the rapid linkage between content exposure, strong emotional responses, and certainty. Such tools would support students in slowing down, considering how their algorithms shape what they see, questioning how authority and credibility are established online, and would create space for them to consider evidence, multiple perspectives, and uncertainty before forming, defending, or amplifying a position.

While many educators described engaging students' digital lives reactively when problems arose, a smaller number articulated approaches grounded in curiosity and openness. A middle school teacher in NYC articulated this position by framing the gap between her own media habits and those of her students as an invitation to learn alongside them.

“Students don’t see social media as media. They see them as sources— authoritative sources, which is worrying to me. And they say, ‘I got this from TikTok’; they are not even citing the specific influencer. [They view] the platform itself as a source.”

– Department head, SoCal

“My students live online in a way that I don’t, not at all.... It’s like they’re coming from another country. I’ll say to the kids, ‘I have no idea. Teach me what you’re looking at. Explain this meme to me.’ That has to be part of it; teachers have to say: ‘Show me what you’re seeing online.’”

– Middle school teacher, NYC

This approach illustrates a productive model of classroom dialogue where expertise is not fixed; instead, students are invited to be the authorities on their own digital experiences, and then their teacher can help them interpret what they see online in context of what they learn in school.

What Educators Say it Takes to Foster Civil Discourse in Classrooms

Several educators emphasized that achieving civil discourse around contentious issues required careful scaffolding, sustained practice, and a

classroom culture that has been intentionally built over time. A high school teacher in SoCal explained that he and colleagues in his department find students very capable of engaging in such conversations under the right conditions.

Educators voiced concerns that if such discussions are attempted without adequate preparation, students will respond in dismissive or ideologically rigid ways. Many teachers had no preservice training or professional learning experiences on fostering classroom civil discourse. Some confessed to feeling uncomfortable with conversations on politically polarizing topics in their personal lives as well.

Even when teachers felt that they had received adequate preparation, they still identified structural constraints that made sustained classroom civil discourse practices difficult. Time pressure was the primary concern. Not only do they have other material to teach, but planning for such discussions and staying current with how students are encountering news events on digital platforms is time-consuming. As a result, they admitted that these activities are often episodic rather than routine.

Beyond logistical challenges, educators felt that facilitating conversations that could

“[Teachers must] create the scaffolding for [students] to actually do [civil discourse] well and to share their thoughts. You can’t just drop that in. You have to build that into the classroom culture and give them the ability to interrogate and research and debrief.”

– High school teacher, SoCal

“When I start the year, I say I want to do a current events lesson once a week. But as the year goes on, other things take over and it falls by the wayside [even though] not letting things get away is how they, and I, get better at talking about them.”

– Middle school teacher, NYC

be perceived as having even the slightest connection to identity, politics, or global conflict was risky.

Teachers’ emotional reality cannot be ignored and their fears are not hypothetical. Educators anticipated potential pushback from parents and their broader school communities if classroom conversations broached polarizing topics like the Middle East conflict or U.S. politics. These concerns mirror national reporting that educators are increasingly pulling back from teaching contentious issues amid fears of professional repercussions.⁸

The high school teacher in SoCal quoted earlier noted that while he felt able to facilitate inquiry-based discussions around more neutral topics, he viewed addressing the Middle East conflict as more risky.

When asked specifically about deciding whether or not to address October 7 and the war in Gaza, educators vacillated between engagement and avoidance. Jewish Day School educators felt a deep responsibility to nurture their students’ positive connection to Israel, while also recognizing the need to grapple with historical complexity, moral ambiguity, and Palestinian perspectives on the conflict.

For Jewish Day School educators, the multifaceted discussions they want to have in their classrooms also risk alienating families and community members who expect Jewish schools to be spaces of pure affirmation, especially during periods of heightened distress like the past two years.

While most educators we spoke with thought students needed to have conversations about the Israel-Hamas war, many also hoped someone else would actually do it. As one teacher in SoCal said, **“I think it would be good, but I don’t want to do it in my class.”**

“The experience of living in a Twitterized discourse is that you can say anything you want, and I think most of the kids will do that outside of class.... I’m not sure that teachers are necessarily comfortable or equipped to know how to navigate those conversations when someone comes in using a—Twitter voice, for lack of a better descriptor.”

– Head of school, NYC

“We’re teaching Jewish kids. We want them to go visit... and to want to support Israel. But we’d be leaving out this important piece, that Israel does have flaws. Their government’s choices aren’t always the choice we’d make, and there are consequences to these choices. There’s more than one side... we’d be doing them a disservice by not giving them a fuller picture.”

– Middle school administrator, SoCal

Jewish and Jewish Studies educators expressed frustration that addressing October 7 and the war in Gaza seemed to have automatically been assigned to them. This dynamic places disproportionate emotional and instructional labor on a small group of highly affected teachers. It also deprives students of opportunities to engage the issue through multiple disciplinary perspectives across their coursework.

Educators’ decisions about whether to engage was never about whether the conflict was important or mattered to students. Rather, they view attempting classroom discourse on this and other contentious topics as a no-win scenario: personally and professionally risky on the one hand, and ethically troubling to avoid, on the other.

Teachers we spoke with are certain civil discourse belongs in the classroom. But they have questions about how to do it well and consistently, without worrying they will be left out on a limb alone if challenges arise. This gap between their professional commitments and practical support highlight the need for structured, adaptable curricular resources that can shift civil discourse from a liability to a core dimension of classroom learning.


Isolated Efforts from Educators Can’t Sustain Civil and Civic Learning

Across our educator interviews, a consistent mismatch emerged between teachers’ commitments and their capacity to act on them. Many educators described relying on improvised strategies—brief, episodic moments that offered glimpses into students’ digital lives, such as asking students to explain a meme or a viral post. While these moments of curiosity and openness can be productive, educators emphasized that they are difficult to sustain, replicate, or scale.

School leaders echoed this concern. Without coordinated approaches or shared frameworks, they noted, students receive uneven and sometimes contradictory messages about the importance of digital discernment, evidence, and civic responsibility. What happens in one classroom may not carry into the next, leaving students to piece together expectations on their own.

Educators do not need permission to care about students' civic learning, nor proof that grappling with complexity benefits young people. They already know both to be true. What they are asking for—and what they need—are infrastructures that make these commitments consistently actionable. They need frameworks that support engaging tough topics across subjects and grade levels; structures that encourage reciprocal learning between students and educators; and shared approaches that reduce the burden on individual teachers.

In short, fostering a thoughtful civic community cannot depend on isolated acts of courage or improvisation. It must be a shared educational responsibility, designed into the system.



“Even broaching [the Israeli-Palestinian conflict]... I think for some schools, in some parts of the country, I would get fired.”

– High school teacher, SoCal

IV. WHAT WE LEARNED BY REVIEWING CURRENT CURRICULUM

In addition to interviews with dozens of students and teachers, we did our own analysis of the current curriculum and teacher development resource landscape. We wanted to learn what tools and supports already exist to help teachers facilitate learning and discussion about contentious topics with their students. This knowledge base will empower Or Initiative to bring together strengths of existing materials and create new resources that are needed in the field.

It has been the Or Initiative team’s experience that productive classroom and community discussions about contentious topics requires individuals to have:



We identified and reviewed teaching resources that support one or more of these learning areas. When looking for classroom resources that seek to establish a shared evidence base for students, we specifically targeted curricula that addressed our initial case study: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

What We Did

We began by conducting a wide-ranging review of 84 organizations, curriculum models, and funder networks working in civil discourse, media literacy, peace/conflict education, and other related areas (see details in the online appendix on our website). We mapped the ecosystem that Or Initiative will join, clustering similar approaches, identifying promising frameworks,

and highlighting areas where few resources currently exist—particularly for middle and high school audiences navigating complex global issues through digital media.

WE CAST A WIDE NET IN RELATION TO THREE CONTENT AREAS, BROADLY DEFINED AS:

1

Digital knowledge development:

Curricula and teaching resources that name among their objectives supporting students’ development of media literacy, digital literacy, and digital citizenship.

2

The Middle East Conflict:

Curricula and teaching resources that teach about the Israel-Palestinian conflict, the legacies of 1948 (of Israeli independence and/or the Nakba, or catastrophe, as remembered by Palestinians), and/or resources on October 7 and the ensuing war in Gaza.

3

Civil discourse:

Curricula and teaching resources that identify as objectives the support of skill development in dialogue, classroom discussion, courageous conversations, active listening, and other similar topics.

There were some organizations and offerings we decided to exclude from our review, despite their work in one or more of these three content areas. We prioritized pedagogically grounded materials that are either ready or adaptable for use in middle and high school classrooms. We excluded those designed as “one-off” or limited workshops or trainings that did not include classroom materials. Some of the organizations we initially identified in the three content areas lacked public-facing resources for educators, which prevented us from fully evaluating their offerings. When searching for civil discourse materials, we also excluded those that focused more generally on conflict resolution and community-building (resources which are generally aimed at college students and adults), if they didn’t offer classroom-ready tools.

We also chose not to include resources focused on debate tactics, prioritizing those that emphasized discussion or deliberation. When searching the digital literacy space, we looked beyond one-off news literacy lessons, and instead prioritized more comprehensive approaches. We prioritized resources that addressed social media, AI, and student engagement rather than only focusing on online safety. For resources on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we filtered out advocacy-driven content and discussion-only resources in favor of those that sought to provide structured, nonpartisan, and evidence-based approaches.

Next, we identified a set of 22 of these 84 organizations to investigate more closely because of their strong alignment with Or Initiative’s mission. We conducted in-depth interviews with their curriculum designers, reviewed their pedagogical frameworks and materials, and, when possible, participated in their professional learning experiences. From this deeper analysis, we gained valuable insights into how successful programs integrate emotional safety, knowledge-building, and digital fluency—and how Or might extend these models in partnership with these organizations, in addition to developing our own curriculum development and professional learning programs.

The lens we applied throughout the curriculum landscape review was sharpened by Or Initiative’s foundational goal: to support students in navigating complex, high-stakes societal issues with discernment, empathy, and civic agency. In particular, we wanted to understand how the ecosystem of organizations and resources supports each of the following:

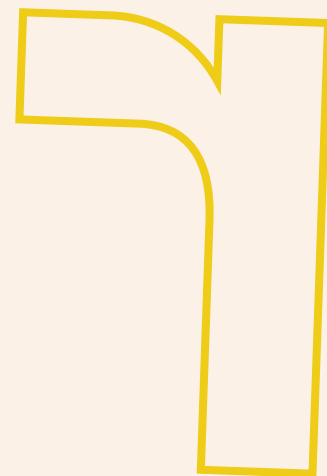
Alignment with Or Initiative’s mission: using a contentious, complex social issue to foster learning and engagement with social/digital media and to improve civil discourse between adolescents.

Courageous engagement: supporting students to understand and engage with current and contentious topics with bravery and rigor.

Embracing complexity: encouraging students to analyze diverse perspectives, engage the inherent tensions within complex issues, and resist false binaries.

Explicit skill-building: offering specific scaffolds and frameworks for students to develop skills in civil discourse, digital knowledge development, and evidence-based understanding of complex issues.

Robust teacher support: supporting classroom implementation by providing teachers professional learning, coaching, and clear instructional materials.



What We Found

THREE KEY THEMES EMERGED FROM OUR ANALYSIS:

1

Few curricula bridge the gap between classroom learning and how students are learning about, processing, and discussing contentious issues online. Students are learning about and experiencing events like the Israel-Hamas war and the murder of Charlie Kirk in highly charged online spaces without support from adults, in or out of school. While there is an array of teaching resources that promote civil discourse and classroom discussion more broadly, they rarely make a direct link between the most contentious current events and the teaching strategies for supporting classroom discussions across differences. We see the potential for new curricula to bridge this gap by integrating students' online learning with a shared evidence base on specific social issues, enabling them to build knowledge and engage in meaningful discussion in and beyond the classroom, including online.

2

Digital literacy curricula often emphasize the risks of young people's online engagement, while failing to recognize the opportunities. Most existing curricula provide students with explicit or implicit lists of do's and don'ts, but do not engage students with a vision of what participating in online discourse and knowledge development could be. We see an opportunity to engage students as partners in leveraging their digital skills and experiences to engage in more civil, evidence-based discussions of contentious topics online and in real life.

3

There is a burgeoning field of digital tools—many that are AI- and LLM-based—designed to foster civil discourse skills. These tools are in their infancy, and mostly geared for use by emerging adults instead of middle and high school students. Nevertheless, we see possibilities for creating and integrating AI tools that scaffold civil discourse skills for middle and high school students—if they have been created with and for young people's specific developmental stages. These tools would need to provide students with low-stakes rehearsal opportunities and support, but without sacrificing or shortcutting the productive struggles that are essential for learning to engage with others face-to-face about difficult topics.

V. THE OR CHALLENGE: BUILDING CIVIL DISCOURSE IN A DIGITAL AGE

Or Initiative is developing a distinct identity by taking a developmental approach to building young people’s capabilities at key transition points—as they anticipate transition from middle to high school (in 8th grade), when they begin to concretely consider post-secondary options (in 11th grade), and early in their undergraduate years.

This approach reflects the belief that young people can build civil and civic muscle well before college—and will do so more effectively if they are building on and actively applying an existing skillset. We are also mindful that 40 percent of U.S. high school graduates do not pursue a college degree¹⁶, and firmly believe that the skills we focus on should accrue to all young Americans.

The Or Initiative Challenge

We begin with an assertion shared by many of the educators we have engaged this past year: a commitment to advancing classroom communication and the need to help (re)build a pluralistic society. We recognize the difficult choice that has confronted too many in the education sector; they either:

- Remove tough topics from classroom discourse to protect students and teachers from conflict and avoid “culture wars,” or
- Attempt to address the issues of the day, but without adequate time to dig deeply into what students are most interested in or need to know, and without the resources to teach these issues with the necessary complexity.

Or Initiative’s work does not seek to tell young people what to think. We want to enable them to generate knowledge from high-quality evidence, to become digitally discerning, and to build civil discourse capacities to remain in constructive relationships with peers and adults over complex topics. Adnan Jaber made this point powerfully to Chapman students at an Or Initiative event in April 2025.

Our interviews and reviews of extant research, teaching, and learning resources have surfaced three core challenges for educators, researchers, philanthropic leaders, and technologists. Each is already visible in classrooms. Each is solvable only if we stop treating adolescent development, digital life, and civic learning as separate problems. And each requires collaborating with educators—honoring the great work already underway, while insisting on the paradigm shift that this moment demands.

What Sets Or Initiative Apart

A commitment to high-quality formative and evaluative research informs every aspect of our work. The approach is guided by four principles:



A YOUTH-FIRST, ASSET-BASED LENS

We start from what teens currently think, do, and feel to generate their curiosity and confidence to learn deeply about complex topics and then engage peers effectively. Young people's perspectives shape our work beginning with exploratory interviews and continuing through testing and refinement. From that basis, we equip educators to meet students where they are and guide them toward the skills and knowledge they need.

SHARED EVIDENCE IS THE FOUNDATION FOR A SHARED REALITY— AND BUILDING A SHARED FUTURE

In a fractured media environment, even the events of the day are often in dispute. And yet, if we believe we live in a knowable world (and we do!), we must reestablish the importance of a shared evidence base. To understand how the past explains the present—and to shape a shared future—young people need high-quality resources they can analyze, discuss, and debate together.

DIGITAL TOOLS FOR SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Young people are learning from digital media and social platforms with little adult support for interpreting what they see. We ask how the formats young people already use can motivate deeper engagement with more diverse, higher-quality sources—and help them recognize credible information in ways that transfer beyond a single lesson or topic.

A DEVELOPMENTALLY STAGED APPROACH TO CIVIL DISCOURSE

We will design interventions that motivate young people to engage deeply—not performatively—with complex issues. Civil discourse includes dialogue skills, but it goes further: it is the capacity for strategic, empathetic, real-time argumentation grounded in evidence. Developing this capacity is not just about helping students “get along.” It is about cultivating the skills that sustain pluralism and democracy in an increasingly fragmented and digitized age.

CHALLENGE 1:

Classrooms must be counterweights again—places where young people and teachers can slow down, acknowledge reality, and make meaning together.

Our students are living in the most connected and chaotic information environment in history. The speed of reaction has replaced the depth of reflection. They are pressured to declare a stance on a news event or social issue before having time to think or learn. We heard again and again in our interviews that the more time young people spend online absorbing others' reactions after polarizing events, the worse they feel—and the less sure they become that anyone can talk reasonably with them about what is happening.

This is why classrooms must be the antidote. Deep learning requires slowing down. Our classrooms should be where we model that disagreement need not lead to dehumanization. Where we remind students that discomfort is not the enemy of learning; it is where genuine growth begins. Ahmed Fouad Alkhatib reminded us of these realities at an Or Initiative event at Chapman in October 2025.

“If you must pick a side in the conflict, be on the side of the builders rather than the destroyers.”

– Adnan Jaber, Tech2Peace

In a fractured media landscape, classrooms are among our last shared civic spaces.

Classrooms are the places where we can still say: read this, not because it confirms your views, but because it challenges them. Classrooms are where we can insist on distinguishing between dialogue and dogma, and between disagreement and disinformation.

But classrooms cannot function as counterweights if we treat contentious events as rare interruptions. They are part of young people's daily lives. And silence after such events is never neutral. Silence becomes a teacher in its own right: it teaches that the hardest questions belong outside of school, and that public life is something students must navigate without us.¹⁷

So answering this first challenge does not require heroics. It requires routines and infrastructure that help teachers re-enter the conversation rather than retreat from it. We believe educators need permission and practical supports to do three things—consistently, not occasionally:

- **Acknowledge civic shocks quickly and directly.**

Naming a moment signals that students' fears and questions belong in school, not only online or in their peer community. Silence can diminish the classroom teacher's purpose or inadvertently signal indifference.

- **Model how to sit with complexity.**

Empathy is not agreement. It is the intellectual courage to understand before judging, to hold multiple truths in tension. Students need to learn that they can condemn, for example, political violence while still grappling honestly with why some ideas wound and provoke, and that they can feel grief and anger and still choose to treat people they disagree with with respect.


- **Cultivate habits of hope.**

Civic learning cannot survive on critique alone. Young people need small, real practices of care and connection that restore faith in one another and by extension, motivate them to attempt civil discourse.

What the field must build now is scaffolding that makes these moments teachable, instead improvisational.

What Or Initiative will contribute:

Beginning in 8th- and 11th-grade classrooms, our curriculum and professional learning will make acknowledging complexity, sitting with uncertainty, and cultivating hope, more routine. We will offer evidence-based protocols that protect teachers from having to “wing it” under pressure and help students slow down, identify what is knowable, and learn to speak with necessary complexity and empathy.



“Please, never become a zealot. Always have some space for humility, for listening to something deep that is uncomfortable.”

– Ahmed Fouad Alkhatib, Founder,
Realign for Palestine

CHALLENGE 2:

Digital literacy must become digital knowledge development—asset-based, platform-sensitive, and inseparable from tough content.

A striking finding from our interviews with teens is not their naïveté but their sophistication. Adolescents understand algorithms, often better than adults. They curate their feeds strategically. They know that in online spaces, outrage is rewarded. They recognize that extremes dominate online, but don’t necessarily recognize how many moderates stay quiet.

And still, many told us that they don’t know how to determine what is true anymore. When “nothing online is real,” evidence loses its power and civic life breaks down at the root. This epistemic exhaustion is not a side issue. **There can be no civil discourse without a shared foothold in reality.**

The field’s current response is too often mismatched with the experiences that young people are having every day. Digital citizenship is frequently taught as protection from danger, but is detached from the content young people are actually wrestling with and from their developmental strengths. Too many curricula, and our current public discourse, treat young people’s digital habits as deficits.

We take a different stance: young people’s digital habits are a springboard. They are already bearing witness; already seeking community; already trying to assemble meaningful narratives from fragments. The challenge is to help them do that work wisely. The strongest digital learning paradigms of the last two decades—from participatory culture¹⁸ to connected learning¹⁹—have argued that young people learn best when we build on the ecosystems where identity, peer belonging, and meaning-making are already happening.

So we define the second challenge as a modernization of digital literacy into digital knowledge development: not a checklist or a standalone unit, but a set of evidence-building practices braided into deeper, consequential learning that integrate digital skills and practices meaningfully into formal and informal learning. This will require:

- **Platform-specific inquiry:** learning how TikTok, YouTube, AI search, and group chats shape narratives differently—and why.
- **Verification as lived practice:** sourcing, lateral reading, triangulation, and bias detection being taught through real feeds and real cases, not sanitized or irrelevant examples. This draws directly on the groundbreaking work of [Digital Inquiry Group](#), which treats online verification as a prerequisite for democratic participation.
- **AI-era discernment:** understanding synthetic media, persuasive framing, and algorithmic incentives as part of civic reasoning.

Digital knowledge development should not be taught separately from tough topics like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or climate change. Young people are learning about these issues in digital spaces; the only question is whether we will help guide them to do that more effectively and accurately, or not.

What Or Initiative will contribute:

Or Initiative plans to build curricular tools that use students’ authentic digital ecosystems as learning texts. They will build knowledge about the Middle East conflict and future contentious issues while simultaneously practicing verification, lateral reading, contextualization, and AI-era skepticism. Digital inquiry should not be an appetizer before “the real lesson.” It can and should be the way lessons take shape.

CHALLENGE 3:

Build the talent, tools, and shared infrastructure that make courageous teaching possible.

If the first two challenges are about what adolescents must learn. The third is about what the system must do for educators and for the field. Our interviews with teachers show a painful paradox: they feel morally compelled to help students make sense of polarization and civic conflict, but fear professional exposure when they do. Many want frameworks, shared norms, and leadership backing—not the expectation that they will improvise perfectly under close and increasing public scrutiny.

So the third challenge is straightforward: stop outsourcing civil and civic courage to individual educators. Build collective capacity. One way to do so is with a new model—a different teaching paradigm for a polarized, digital age.

“Students feel safer and more intellectually alive when teachers assign across difference and make clear that class is a place for inquiry, not ideological performance.”

– Natalia Mehlman Petrzela, *The New School*

The “Or Sandwich”: Building a new evidence-based teaching and learning model

Most teaching and learning resources address only one piece of the teaching challenge that our research with educators and students identified. Our curriculum review found almost none that integrate all three in a developmental pathway. The leaders we spoke with led us to conclude that that integration is not cosmetic—it’s the point.

The Or paradigm incorporates:

- **Digital knowledge development**
- **Civil discourse skills**
- **Rigorous, multi-narrative evidence base on a tough topic**

This integrated approach requires a classroom stance that protects inquiry, enabling students to engage without feeling pushed to mirror their teacher’s perspectives. Historian Natalia Mehlman Petrzela, a member of Or Initiative’s advisory board, reminds us how this approach serves students.

Modernize Practice through the Civil Discourse Accelerator

Another insight from our review is simple but striking: if we ask schools to modernize without new tools, we are asking them to fail. That is why we are launching the Civil Discourse Accelerator, a talent development program for emerging edtech designers.

The Civil Discourse Accelerator will bring tech designers together with teens and educators in a national model for ethical, student-driven, civic edtech. The aim is to develop new toolmakers and new tools capable of transforming how teens engage with information and with one another—preparing them to counter polarization and participate constructively in civic life. This field-building effort will bridge academic research, technology design, and classroom practice to cultivate a new generation of innovators who create tools with young people, not on them.

Fellows will develop and refine digital tools to support civil discourse and digital knowledge development in relation to current events and tough topics, beginning with the Middle East conflict. Fellows will build AI- and tech-enabled tools that make Or’s integrated model teachable at scale and easily updatable over time. These tools will be designed to do what classrooms do best: slow students down, keep them anchored in evidence, and make room for complexity and care—so that face-to-face discourse becomes a meaningful culmination, not a cliff dive.

We are also challenging the edtech and research communities to collaborate with us to refine and adapt promising tools already in the world, including:



[Cortico.ai](#) — a human-led, AI-assisted dialogue sensemaking platform developed with MIT’s Center for Constructive Communication. Cortico.ai analyzes small-group conversations to identify patterns across many dialogues and build shared understanding. Its Teen Dialogue Accelerator is already piloting youth-led civic conversations and AI-supported listening in public-library and school settings, offering a strong model for helping teens practice civil discourse with real stakes.



LumiStory.ai — an AI-supported creative-production platform that enables young people to develop and share narratives in media forms they care about (e.g., comics and interactive formats). Lumi is not a discourse tool, but it is a powerful vehicle for youth-authored perspective-taking and identity exploration — capacities that are foundational to civil discourse. We see potential in adapting Lumi-style storymaking into Or contexts, especially as students prepare to faithfully represent others’ experiences before peer dialogue.



Sway — an AI-guided dialogue tool being tested in higher-education settings to support one-on-one conversations across opposing views on divisive issues, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Sway pairs students with different perspectives and uses an AI “Guide” to rephrase inflammatory language, prompt evidence-based reasoning, and keep discussions constructive. Like all tools in this space, it raises design questions we intend to study carefully, but it offers a concrete example of how AI might scaffold, without displacing, the human relationship-building that is at the center of civil discourse.

Convening the Field Toward Shared Commitments

Curriculum and tech-driven teaching tools alone will not heal civic fracture. But they can make classrooms the places where repair begins.

Or Initiative will regularly convene educators, researchers, philanthropies, and technology leaders to reduce siloing and fragmentation, align around integrated frameworks, and practice shared responsibility for this work. We are learning from bridge-building field strategies such as **New Pluralists**, which emphasize relational infrastructure and cross-ideological alignment as prerequisites for democratic renewal.

We also locate our convening work within an ecosystem of educators already teaching about the Israeli-Palestinian story with nuance and care. For example, OpenDor Media’s **ConnectED** initiative, building on its Unpacked for Educators community, has built a strong professional learning and content base for helping schools teach about Israel, Jewish history, antisemitism, and the Israeli-Palestinian story. It provides a valuable model of what field coherence can look like in practice.

That is why multi-sector, multi-stakeholder convenings are not an accessory to Or Initiative's work; it is central to the change and contribution we seek to foster.

What Or Initiative will contribute:

Professional learning resources matched to real teacher constraints; Civil Discourse Accelerator Fellows to develop tools designed for teens' needs and developmental stage; and convenings that promote civil discourse, digital knowledge development, and rigorous content into a coherent teaching and learning strategy.

Louise Dubé, CEO of iCivics and Or Initiative Advisory Board member, captures the cost of fragmentation in a way that mirrors what we are hearing from the field.

"The level of intense polarization means we don't agree on what to teach. When we don't agree on what to teach, then we don't teach it. When we don't teach it, we don't practice it."

– Louise Dubé, CEO, iCivics

VI. CONCLUSION

We are living through a moment of real urgency for schools—one that asks more of young people, and of their teachers, than any of us should accept as normal. Adolescents are encountering intense domestic and geopolitical conflicts in the same digital spaces where they build friendships, explore identities, and learn about the world. War in the Middle East and Ukraine, deep polarization over the country's direction, and a culture of instant reaction reach them in real time, long before they have the context or confidence to make sense of what they see. In these environments, they are often pushed to "pick a side" on complex issues before they have had the chance to build knowledge, reflect, or ask questions—conditions that reward extremes over nuance and humility.

As we fully enter the AI era, where access to information is expanding even as false certainty becomes easier to manufacture and harder to detect, the need for classrooms to be sanctuaries for empathetic dialogue and careful thought has never been more urgent. They are also crucial spaces for reinforcing high-quality evidence as the foundation for developing shared understandings of an issue, and possibilities for its resolution.

In every interview we conducted with middle- and high-school students, educators, curriculum leaders, and technology partners, one theme has been unwavering: **young people are already processing world events and tough issues in digital spaces that appear open, but are often toxic.**

The urgent question we began our Or inquiries with is whether young people will navigate these experiences alone—at the mercy of algorithmic extremes—or with confident guidance that helps them slow down, verify what they can rely on, and stay grounded in their relationships with one another. This framing builds on a long arc of field-defining work, stemming in part from Henry Jenkins’ early insistence that participatory digital culture is a civic asset only if schools help youth develop the literacies, ethics, and negotiation skills that such participation demands.

An Invitation and Challenge to the Field

We are not naïve about how hard this work will be. We are asking more of schools at a time when schools are already asked to be, and do, everything. We are asking more of educators who feel exhausted and under-protected. We are asking more of philanthropies, researchers, and technology companies to stop sponsoring isolated solutions and testing on kids, and to instead start building an integrated, socially responsible, civic learning ecosystem. Recent analysis of the broader ed-tech “patchwork” underscores how fragmentation in tools mirrors fragmentation in learning aims—and why field-level alignment matters now.

But the alternative to this hard work would be to accept that young people will keep learning the hardest lessons of this era alone, in algorithmic spaces that contribute to, even profit from, their anger and confusion.

So, the Or Challenge is a call:

To educators and school leaders

- **Recognize that digital media are ubiquitous forces in adolescents’ lives.** Reducing media consumption and cell phone use in schools may be necessary to develop students’ capacities for focused attention, but restrictions must be matched by ensuring teens build new digital skills and scaffolds. We cannot leave students to process the world alone in feeds built for certainty and speed.
- **Insist on evidence.** Base contentious discussions in shared texts and verifiable sources.
- **Teach discourse as, and through, practice.** Students cannot do what they have never rehearsed, and teachers cannot teach what they do not know.
- **Treat digital life as an untapped asset to drive curriculum.** If we ban what students live inside and say they love, we lose the chance to teach discernment and to build civic agency where it forms in their everyday lives.

To philanthropy

- **Fund integration, not silos.** Support models that intertwine civil discourse, digital knowledge development, and tough-topic content. The Or Initiative hopes to build on the groundbreaking work done by leading organizations such as iCivics, Digital Inquiry Group, Common Sense Media, Facing History and Ourselves, ConnectED, the Institute for Curriculum Services, and others.
- **Back long-term infrastructure and R&D.** Creating talent pipelines and tool-updating capacity in new curricular offerings has to be foundational, not an afterthought. Investing in research to create evidence-based, rigorously evaluated tools and programs that advance curriculum, professional development, and assessment is worthy of close consideration.

To researchers and technology leaders

- **Design with youth development front-of-mind.** Support them in the worthy struggles to deeply understand complex issues and to forge connections with each other. The future of our pluralistic democracy depends on young people seeing these struggles as essential. Technologies that remove that friction and provide students an easy answer are working against what they need most.
- **Design to make classrooms into effective counterweights to fragmented digital information environments.** Civic tech should seek to support teachers, not supplant them.
- **Measure what matters.** Experts in assessment must create new measures that go well beyond knowledge and skill gains to include dispositions for civic life and civil communication (e.g., participation, dialogue endurance, community engagement), as well as youth resilience and belonging.

Building A New Paradigm Together

We began building the Or Initiative by listening. What we heard was both sobering and hopeful: young people are witnessing broken communication everywhere they look. And yet, they still want to connect across differences and are keenly aware when they are not being told the whole story. They believe their classrooms can still be places for real connection—with ideas, viewpoints, and one another. We offer these challenges not as a critique from the sidelines, but as a blueprint for shared work grounded in what young people and educators have told us they need.

If we settle for the status quo, young people will continue to make sense of the most consequential issues of their lives largely in isolation, in spaces that reward speed and outrage over reflection. But if we take up this work together, classrooms can become places where students learn to do more: not just consume information, but build knowledge; not just form opinions, but earn them; not just react to conflict, but stay with one another long enough to understand, grow, and build something better.

With courage and the patient work of education, we can help the next generation become citizens who are prepared to participate.

If we succeed, our students will not only learn how to think; they will learn how to build a shared future with the strength to resist polarization and the wisdom to repair our pluralistic democracy.

That is the Or Challenge—and the paradigm shift Or Initiative exists to help build, with and for the field.

Let's get to work.



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Methodological Details

For details about the interviews with students and educators, the schools included, and the curriculum landscape review design, please see online appendix for download from www.orinitiative.org.

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