

What Your Colleagues Are Saying . . .

I strongly recommend that educators interested in high-quality discussion as both a form and outcome of pedagogy read *Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities*. Schmidt and Pinkney bring decades of experience to the task of expertly situating the need to teach young people how to participate in civil discourse in our current political context. Through lively and well-written narrative, the authors bring a lot of new wine to a venerable bottle. Readers will walk away with strong rationales for focusing on civil discourse in schools, along with very clear and pragmatic examples of what good looks like.

—Diana E. Hess

Dean

University of Wisconsin–Madison School of Education

How can schools and teachers prepare our youngest citizens to actively engage in discourse about issues in society? Schmidt and Pinkney’s book brilliantly explains why discussing contentious issues matters, for both the future of our democracy and student learning, while providing a wealth of practical ideas and resources for teachers. This book couldn’t be more timely and enduring.

—Stefanie Rosenberg Wager

Past President of the National Council for the Social Studies

Helping young people to learn to discuss contentious issues is one of the most promising ways to strengthen—and even to save—our republic. In *Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities*, Schmidt and Pinkney provide a scholarly, thoughtful, and also highly practical guide to doing just that. Teachers will find it extraordinarily useful.

—Peter Levine

Tisch College of Civic Life
Tufts University

Schmidt and Pinkney are seasoned and masterful social studies educators and advocates. They present the topic of civil discourse in a manner that is knowledgeable and approachable. The strategies presented in *Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities* implore educators to be courageous and incorporate these techniques and practices in their classrooms.

—Amber Coleman-Mortley

Podcaster, Civic Evangelist, and Parent Educator

Masterful and timely, Schmidt and Pinkney’s *Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities*, is—to paraphrase David McCullough—“a guide [for social studies teachers] to navigation in perilous times.” This brilliantly scaffolded set of practices guides social studies teachers through the often-challenging process of bringing meaningful and constructive civil discourse into the classroom. This is a must-have for your social studies classroom.

—Nathan McAlister

Social Studies Teacher

2010 National History Teacher of the Year

Schools can never be culturally neutral terrains devoid of politics. And because of this, educators will continue to grapple with the teaching of potentially contentious topics. We live in a time where students and educators are confronted with political debates, blatant racism, a global pandemic, and more. *Civil Discourse* offers classroom teachers and school leaders a practical guide to facilitate classroom conversations with knowledge and sensitivity. It will equip you with strategies and tools to not only act tomorrow but to critically reflect on your own practice as an educator.

—Darnell Fine

Instructional Coach

Civil discourse is essential for a functioning democracy. Schmidt and Pinkney lay out a step-by-step guide using building blocks that allow educators to help build communities in their classrooms by allowing them to foster civil discourse with their students. They involve multiple stakeholders in the solution-based approach to discussing contentious topics in classrooms and how that can make a larger impact outside the classroom. This is a must-read for all who work with students and who want to make an impact through civil discourse.

—Elizabeth Evans

Director of Civic Education

Center for Political Thought and Leadership

Arizona State University

Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities offers hope and help for educators during this highly polarized moment. Co-authors Schmidt and Pinkney urge educators to take courage and view contentious topics as an opportunity to train and instill understanding, belonging, and empathy in students. This book is packed with ideas, tips, and strategies to aid the educator in successfully establishing and cultivating a classroom where civil discourse leads to a community where students learn to accept and celebrate differences with maturity and respect; with *Civil Discourse*, students will learn how to think, not what to think.

—**Karalee Wong Nakatsuka**

United States History Teacher
Arcadia, CA

2019 Gilder Lehrman California History Teacher of the Year

Engaging students in discussion requires the teacher to think about much more than which questions to ask. Covering everything from how to communicate with parents to what to do when discussions go awry, this succinct guide provides educators with the foundations and strategies they need to create high-quality classroom discussions.

—**Paula McAvoy**

PhD Coordinator for the Social Studies Program Area of Study
North Carolina State University

Now, more than ever, our young people need to be equipped with the right tools to engage in critical conversations that will allow them to take informed action on issues that negatively impact our society. *Civil Discourse*, with its practical guidance for building community, cultivating empathy, and leaning into discomfort with contentious topics, is exactly the type of resource that educators, no matter the subject area, need to support the next generation of change makers. Bravo and thank you!

—**Fay Gore**

Former Director of K–12 Social Studies,
North Carolina Department of Public Instruction
Co-Editor of the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3)*
Framework for Social Studies
State Standards (2013)

In a time of increasing political and social polarization, understanding the ins and outs of civil discourse has never been more important or potentially more impactful. As with so much else, it is often left up to our educators to navigate a difficult path in ensuring that students learn how to engage in civil discourse around difficult conversations. *Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities* provides both experienced and beginning educators with a way to navigate that path. It is an engaging and enjoyable map for the educator looking for a way forward in improving discussion and tackling tough issues!

—Steve Masyada

Executive Director
Lou Frey Institute
University of Central Florida

This is a timely and needed work for teachers engaging in democratic education. The authors both provide practical approaches to engaging with controversies within the classroom and take on key issues of the day—namely, polarization, the effects of misinformation, and the need to engage with others in civil and empathic ways. They make the case for how schools can play a role in addressing these issues and provide practical and applicable steps forward for teachers at a time when these practices may place them under a political microscope in their communities.

—Jeremy Stoddard

Professor of Curriculum and Instruction
Director of Graduate Studies and UW Teach
University of Wisconsin–Madison

Schmidt and Pinkney write at a time when the need for students to engage in true dialogue and discourse is more important than ever. The pointed examples, protocols and structures, and compelling data make this an essential tool for every educator who engages in such rich topics. Students are naturally curious, opinionated, and eager to discuss bold ideas and controversial concepts, and as a result, they need deft educators who are equipped to teach the skills in discourse while thinking critically, suspending judgement. This book fills an important void in the education of educators to effectively nurture a community of learners, of any age, to critically explore the ideas, beliefs, and perspectives of those around them.

—Scott Thomas

Minnesota School Administrator

Schmidt and Pinkney have created a road map for educators to build confidence in instilling the skills of civic engagement in students. As they brilliantly note, by not talking to those with whom we disagree, we are choosing to ignore our interdependence. Economic, social, educational, and environmental benefits can all develop in the form of a well-informed voter focused not on the correct answer but rather on the correct way to navigate civil discourse. This reading gives me hope that students today will be better equipped to create a sustainable civil society for us all.

—Stephanie Rogers Canter

EdTech Professional, Advocate for Progressive
Educational Policy, and Local Elected Official

I can almost hear social studies teachers' collective sigh of relief. Schmidt and Pinkney have written a book that illuminates one of education's great challenges and offers realistic, reasonable, and attainable recommendations. The balance of structure and flexibility in their approach reflects an authentic understanding of what it means to be a classroom teacher in this moment. The authors honor teachers' professionalism and expertise, with vigorous assurance that we all have much to learn. The whole book feels like a PLC of gifted, welcoming teachers gathered in a comfortable teachers' lounge, coffee in hand, ready to solve all the world's problems.

—Jessica Ellison

Teacher Education and Curriculum Development
Minnesota Historical Society

Schmidt and Pinkney indisputably define and provide a road map/strategy for civil discourse. In a time when barbershop, hair salon, club, and church meeting conversations can turn contentious and even violent at times, these strategies are a welcomed resource. Providing our students with the necessary skills and processes of considerate, thought-provoking discourse may foster transformation of our individual communities.

—Chanda Robinson

CEO and Founder
Chanda Robinson Consulting
Member of the National Council for the
Social Studies Board of Directors

Schmidt and Pinkney provide a blueprint for teachers who face the daily challenge of tackling contentious topics. *Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities* is a timely resource that will assist teachers with building a classroom culture built on courage, understanding, belonging, and empathy. Teachers are provided helpful strategies that will bolster teacher confidence and ultimately make a positive impact on student learning.

—Daniel Kelley

Principal
Smithfield High School
Smithfield, RI

With our homogenized neighborhoods and echo chamber media bubbles, schools are one of the few places where Americans can engage in discourse about important topics with people who hold differing viewpoints. *Civil Discourse* provides teachers with clear guidance on how to facilitate these invaluable conversations in their classrooms. Teachers from all grade levels will benefit from the wisdom found in these pages.

—Bruce Lesh

Former High School Teacher and Social
Studies Department Chair, Baltimore County Public Schools

Learning how to teach contentious issues is difficult for preservice teachers who don't yet have the confidence to facilitate these types of discussions with students. *Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities* is a road map for teachers on how to get started. Schmidt and Pinkney focus on building community, which is often overlooked in conversations about teaching contentious topics. They lay a foundation for how to have civil discourse in all classrooms—not just social studies ones. This book highlights civil discourse as a life skill—one that all teachers can practice learning from.

—Annie McMahon Whitlock

Associate Professor of Elementary Education
University of Michigan-Flint

In a time when a primer on engaging students in meaningful and purposeful discourse on public matters has never been more needed, Schmidt and Pinkney deliver a comprehensive vision. Each chapter provides a substantive explanation and actionable recommendations for how teachers, collaborative teams, and administrations can work to transform social studies instruction into a much needed foundry for democratic citizenship.

—**Jenifer Hitchcock**

Teacher

Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology

It's time we stop talking about creating active and knowledgeable citizens and start the actual process of training our students to engage in civil and civic discourse. One reason we often push this process to the back burner in our lesson plan books is because we're just not sure what that can look like. In *Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities*, Schmidt and Pinkney provide not just a powerful rationale for developing engaged citizens but the practical tools to make it happen. If you're like me and are tired of randomly searching online for how to facilitate difficult but absolutely vital conversations, then *Civil Discourse* was written specifically for you. Schmidt and Pinkney provide the structure, strategies, and resources you're looking for and that your students need. A perfectly timed book for every educator!

—**Glenn Wiebe**

Curriculum Consultant

This is a must-have book for every educator's personal library. Schmidt and Pinkney provide an invaluable framework and "how-to" guide for teachers who want to foster healthy civil discussions on controversial issues. The authors make this difficult pedagogical task accomplishable, and their practical guidance strengthens the ability of schools to succeed in their most important mission of developing young people into empathetic, informed, and active citizens.

—**Brian Brady**

Founder and President
Youth Engage

Civil Discourse: Classroom Conversations for Stronger Communities provides teachers with a step-by-step practical framework on how to engage students in civil discourse. The framework allows teachers to fully implement the civil discourse framework or make adjustments to their current instructional practices. I really appreciate the discussion on the differences between debate, discussion, and dialogue to ensure that students and teachers learn the differences between the concepts and help students engage in meaningful conversations about American politics.

—Averill Kelley

Social Studies Teacher

Holmes Scholar and PhD Candidate at University of Nevada

Schmidt and Pinkney's book is a wonderful primer for educators who need a jumpstart or a refresher on discourse in civics education. They have gathered many practical and useful tips, guides, and resources for the classroom and personal edification for beginning and veteran educators alike. This book is a must-have for anyone teaching in the social studies classroom and training future social studies educators. As a classroom guide and when designing curriculum, Schmidt and Pinkney's book is an invaluable tool for working with students to create strong and engaging discourse civics education.

—Melissa R. Collum

Teaching Professional

Viterbo University

How will students practice and master the skills of engaging in challenging discussions with people of diverse viewpoints if those conversations aren't happening in classrooms? While the past few years have seen a rise in resources aimed at convincing teachers of this need, too few offer a road map to help make this happen. *Civil Discourse* offers the classroom teacher a step-by-step approach to fostering productive civic dialogue in their classroom. Each chapter identifies a list of essential teacher practices and action steps a teacher can take to make those practices their own. This book is a valuable resource for teachers and teacher-educators looking to bring meaningful discussion back into classrooms.

—Shannon Salter Burghardt

Founding Teacher

Building 21 Allentown

Civil Discourse

From Joe:

This book is dedicated to Donald Henry Schmidt, Jr.

You are the greatest man I have ever known.

I am lucky to have you as my dad.

I love you.

From Nichelle:

*This book is dedicated to Michelle Burmah-Jones and John Pinkney
for always pushing me to do better and letting me know I had a voice.*

Civil Discourse

Classroom Conversations for
Stronger Communities

Joe Schmidt
Nichelle Pinkney

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Schmidt, Joe, author. | Pinkney, Nichelle, author.

Title: Civil discourse : classroom conversations for stronger communities / Joe Schmidt, Nichelle Pinkney.

Description: Thousand Oaks, California : Corwin, 2022. | Series: Corwin teaching essentials | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021059383 | ISBN 9781071856192 (paperback) | ISBN 9781071876961 (epub) | ISBN 9781071876985 (epub) | ISBN 9781071876992 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Community and school—United States. | School environment—United States. | Classroom environment—United States. | Civics—Study and teaching—United States.

Classification: LCC LC221 .S268 2022 | DDC 371.19—dc23/eng/20220302

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021059383>

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

22 23 24 25 26 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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For additional resources related to *Civil Discourse*,
please visit the companion website
at resources.corwin.com/civildiscourse.



Acknowledgments

First and foremost, Joe and Nichelle would like to thank Julie Stern for serving as our author mentor. You took on the challenge of writing this book with us and never stopped smiling and being there for us. Also, we give a big thank you to Sharon Wu, Tori Bachman, Nancy Chung, and everyone at Corwin who believed in us and allowed us to make our dreams a reality.

We also want to thank all of the educators who are working with students to engage in civil discourse and the administrators and community members who support the educators. Without your passion, none of this would be possible.

From Joe:

This book could not have happened without the support of my friends and family who lost me to countless hours of reading and writing. I would like to give a special thank you to my wife, Peggy, for always helping me to remember to live in the present tense and to my daughter, Honore, who always serves as my first editor.

Thank you also to Keith Long and Dan Kallgren for inspiring my love of social studies that started my path in education and to Deb Foster and Jesse Bradley for helping me get my footing during the early years of my career. To Norma Furger, Denise Kalscheur, Tamara Maxwell, and the entire

MMSD Literacy team, thank you for helping me find my voice. I can never say thank you enough to Kris McDaniel for taking the time to mentor me until I finally started to believe in myself. To my colleagues Stefanie Wager, Scott Abbott, Steve Maysada, and all of CS4, thank you for being the support group I never knew I needed. Thank you Jeff Maves, Shane Gower, David Greenham, Janette Kirk, Lee Anne Larsen, the Secondary SIS team, and the iCivics Educator Network for your friendship and patience during this project while always being there to serve as a thought partner and helping make sure I never lose sight of what is going on in our classrooms and communities. Thank you to Dr. Diana Hess, Dr. Paula McAvoy, and Dr. Peter Levine for your tireless efforts and research, which have served as the inspiration for much of this work.

Lastly, thank you Nichelle Pinkney for taking this journey with me. To learn from you and work with you as we breathed life into these pages was a life-changing experience. I could not have done it alone and I will always value our newfound friendship!

From Nichelle:

This labor of love became a reality because of divine intervention and Twitter. I am so thankful to my amazing co-author, Joe Schmidt, for choosing me to go on this journey with him. I have learned and grown so much; this is just the beginning, my friend!

To my amazing siblings for being my first students even when they didn't want to, thank you. I also thank my nieces and nephews for their willingness to sacrifice their "nana time" so I could meet my deadlines. And to the thousands of students who helped me grow to be the teacher I am today, this book would not have been possible without my days on 3443 Fannett Road on D hall.

Thank you to all the amazing teachers that I have worked with, coached, and mentored. There's nothing like being on teams that push you to grow. To my LTT team, thank you for encouraging me and being that support system.

Lastly, to Sheliah Moss, my ninth-grade U.S. History teacher: Thank you for telling me I was a LEADER and that I could change the world. You held me to this as a student, a team member, and then when I became your department chair 10 years later. Because of your words and faith in me, I strive to build leaders in every student and teacher I interact with. Ms. Moss, you were RIGHT . . . I am a LEADER, I will be heard . . . I am now one step closer to changing the world we live in.

PUBLISHER'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Corwin gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the following reviewers:

Valencia Abbott

History/Social Studies Teacher
Rockingham County Schools and Sankofa Consulting

Juan Carmona

Teacher and Dual Enrollment Instructor
Donna High School and South Texas College

Tinisha Shaw

Social Studies Teacher, SEL Specialist, and
Instructional Coach
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About the Authors



Joe Schmidt has worked as a high school teacher and college professor for elementary preservice teachers, and he has also held roles in district and state-level leadership in support of both rural and urban schools. Throughout his career, Joe has served in a variety of leadership positions with numerous social studies–related organizations across

the United States that align with his passion for supporting inspiring and impactful educational opportunities for both students and educators.



Nichelle Pinkney has been a social studies educator for the past 16 years, working as a classroom teacher to a K–12 curriculum director. She has presented and trained teachers nationally and internationally. Nichelle holds a masters of art in educational administration from Lamar University

and a bachelor's degree in sociology with a minor in women's studies from Salem College. Nichelle has found passion in providing equitable education to every student. She has worked to revise curriculum to ensure that it is diverse, equitable, and inclusive for all students and teachers.



Introduction

Civil Discourse Strengthens Communities

*There is no power for change greater than a
community discovering what it cares about.*

Margaret Wheatley

We are at a crossroads as individual nations and as a global community. Political polarization is on the rise and every decision seems to become a flashpoint of anger and resentment (Dimok & Wike, 2020; Lutz Fernandez, 2021). But it doesn't have to be this way. In fact, many studies find that people agree more on local politics than national politics, where organized forces such as political parties telling us what to believe have less influence on our opinions (Jensen et al., 2021). And successful conflict-resolution programs have shown dramatic results in fostering discourse even after violent conflict (North, 2003; Steele, 2021).

The two of us—Joe Schmidt and Nichelle Pinkney—are social studies educators who see civil discourse as the key component to building community. We wrote this book to help educators leverage opportunities to examine our differences in a way to strengthen all of us. As American writer Audre Lorde (1984) wrote, “It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.” This book is a first step for educators who recognize the value of discussing contentious topics. We develop an

understanding of each other through engaging in civil discourse, which allows for the accepting and celebrating of our inevitable differences.

With experience as a classroom teacher in both high school and college as well as roles in district and state-level leadership, Joe has a combination of classroom experience as well as big-picture thinking done in support of educators in both rural and urban districts. He has also served in a variety of positions with social studies–related organizations across the United States, which have provided insight into how to make connections between resources available for educators and how to best implement those resources in the classroom with students. Joe’s professional network allows him to collaborate with educators who represent the diverse perspectives and issues that we see in schools today. He sees student conversations as one of the most important and engaging parts of a student’s education and always encourages his students to have an opinion, even if that opinion may be subject to change as students continue to learn more about the topic.

Nichelle Pinkney’s life experiences as a woman of color teaching and leading social studies education in the southern United States has given her insight into the importance of navigating contentious topics with careful planning and clear communication. She regularly writes lesson plans and assessments for all courses and grade levels from kindergarten through high school and conducts professional development to help teachers improve their craft. She seeks to empower teachers to move past the fear that has become a common part of their jobs by giving them tools to prepare students for democratic participation in a diverse, pluralistic society.

Even though we both have backgrounds in social studies, the need for civil discourse transcends the lines of content areas. Throughout this book, you will see examples related to non-social studies classes as well as ideas, suggestions, and frameworks that are applicable in almost every classroom. By the

end, we hope that districts use this book to create curriculum and policy that supports all students and all educators in all content areas, because we are all a part of something bigger than a single subject area and classroom.

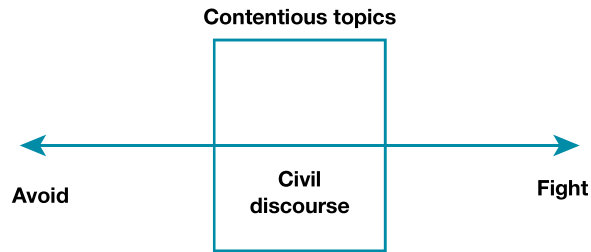
Every person on Earth belongs to distinct communities, and individuals depend on these communities for survival and for living meaningful lives. A community is simply a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common. We are a part of several communities in our lifetimes that help to establish and formulate who we are and who we are destined to become. Infants have both an innate need and desire to belong to a community. In the school system, we establish the importance of belonging to a community as early as kindergarten. We teach the characteristics of a strong community and how to maintain them in the walls of the school, with the hope that this will eventually permeate the cities and countries we live in.

When people come together in communities, disagreement is inevitable. We all disagree with our friends and family on simple things like where to go for dinner or who is responsible for cleaning the kitchen. Part of maturity and strong self-development requires us to listen, empathize, seek understanding, and even compromise. The trouble is, with contentious topics, we often resort to one of two poor choices: avoidance or fighting.

But there is a better way. Civil discourse is an alternative to either avoidance or fighting, as shown in Figure 0.1. The building blocks of civil discourse are courage, understanding, belonging, and empathy. This book helps educators build these foundations so that students learn the skills necessary to navigate thorny issues with maturity and respect for those who hold differing opinions.

Through our communities, we learn how to come together even when it is uncomfortable. As history has shown,

FIGURE 0.1 The Spectrum of Contentious Topics



sometimes we get this right and sometimes we do not. Imagine if the following topics were avoided rather than brought out for formal discussion. When the need arises, we have to be courageous in discussing contentious topics for the betterment of our communities.

Consider these examples:

- In the 1840s, at a time when strong customs and beliefs held that women should be subservient to men in all aspects of life, a community of both women and men came together to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women. Through shared discourse about many contentious aspects of the topic, this community of people wrote the Declaration of Sentiments and their efforts would eventually lead to the passage of the 19th Amendment granting women the right to vote in the United States.
- During the extreme discrimination, oppression, and violence against African Americans in the 1950s, tensions ran high even among those who sought to change these circumstances. Disagreements among activists threatened to derail their mission. But disciplined discourse led to specific messaging for different groups, a result of practicing empathy, and bolstered the organization and tactics of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement.

- At the end of the Cold War, thousands of nuclear weapons were in danger of theft and deployment by nefarious groups. The Cooperative Threat Reduction program, which was responsible for the safe destruction of thousands of nuclear weapons, was the result of years of careful discourse and negotiations (Shonk, 2019).
- In the 1990s, members of the law enforcement community teamed up with the broadcasting community to formally discuss ways to save children from abduction. The conclusion of that discourse is now known as the AMBER Alert, which broadcasts a serious—and uncomfortable—topic across television and radio stations when a child is reported missing. The program has now expanded to cell phone users and to date, over 600 children across the United States have been saved as a result.

In all of these monumental historical examples, there are four common themes that arise: courage, shared understanding, belonging, and empathy. This book is organized by these themes, with each chapter providing resources for educators to teach the skills of discourse to their students. We cannot simply walk into a classroom and ask students to discuss abortion or gun control, for instance, without adequate planning and preparation. We have to gradually lead up to this type of discourse. Chapter 5 is where we offer distinct strategies, but recognize that the first four building blocks must be laid before we get there.

Chapter 1 focuses on the **courage** to embrace our discomfort and come together as a group because it is the first step toward establishing strong communities. As psychologist Susan David (2017) says, “Discomfort is the price of admission to a meaningful life.” Many of us prefer to avoid difficult or sticky conversations, choosing to ignore them and hoping they will go away, but that is the exact opposite of what strong communities need. When we avoid tough conversations, we

weaken our civil societies and make ourselves vulnerable to the power hungry.

The next building block is shared **understanding**, especially around key terms, which we focus on in Chapter 2. We have to be sure that the words we use have the same meaning to all members of the discourse community. And when we shift the focus toward understanding rather than “winning,” we can help our young people have productive conversations that are sorely needed in today’s divided society.

Although communities are essential for human survival, we want to do more than survive. We want to thrive, and a strong sense of **belonging** is the next piece of the puzzle for strong communities, which is the focus of Chapter 3. Healthy communities acknowledge that each member belongs in their community, even when those members have differing thoughts, views, cultures, and abilities. Educators can set up their classroom communities to foster this sense of belonging that is so essential to living meaningful lives.

Finally, strong communities practice **empathy**, recognizing that each member has a unique and valid perspective, which is the focus of Chapter 4. By viewing the world through other people’s perspective, we can better understand each other and live together in harmony. Strong communities thrive on the concepts of embracing and acknowledging courage, common good, belonging, and empathy of their members. This book seeks to build these values back into our school communities.

With that foundation in place, we can have **discourse** around contentious topics, which is the focus of Chapter 5. To help busy educators remember these building blocks, we can use the acronym **CUBED**. This book sets the foundation for discourse through fostering courage, understanding, belonging, and empathy that leads to productive discourse for stronger communities. Each chapter provides a checklist at the end

to ensure teachers are prepared to foster civil discourse with their students. See Figure 0.2 for our visual of the building blocks of discourse.

Schools play an essential role in our communities. As we type this, there are hurricanes, wildfires, and floods gripping the United States and many other parts of the world. We face a climate crisis, a physical and mental health crisis, a global refugee and migration crisis, and the backsliding of democracies across the globe. While it is certainly not the job of students or teachers to solve these challenges, we can build an important foundation by equipping young people with strong skills in discourse around contentious topics. If we get this right, we have the chance to emerge stronger than ever. Thank you for joining us.

FIGURE 0.2 Building Blocks of Discourse

