

## **Region high school teachers, students sound off on discussing President Trump in the classroom**

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**T**he Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance project released a **report** last year titled "The Trump Effect: The Impact of the Presidential Campaign on our Nation's Schools."

The report's executive summary notes that of the 2,000 K-12 teachers surveyed, 2/3 reported immigrant and minority students worried what would happen to their families post-election. Half of the teachers reported uncivil discourse as a result of the election. More than one-third reported seeing anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment.

### **Wading through the rhetoric**

So how do the Region's high school teachers and children perceive or handle President Trump's rhetoric?

"He shoots straight from the hip, with no filter," Steve Lopez, U.S. history teacher at Munster High School, said. "I think the kids are more taken aback by this rather than embracing of it."

Christopher Cantoni, government and economics teacher at Hanover Central High School, says he's asked students in discussions how they feel an ideal leader should act.

"They (students) said that a leader must be trustworthy, a good communicator, well-educated, confident, understands the public and has an open mind," Cantoni said. "When they stated those qualities, I asked if they felt that Trump had some of these. They stated as a business leader, yes. However, as president they didn't see much evidence of these qualities."

Blessing Nnate, a sophomore at Lake Central High School, believes the president's Twitter use isn't proper for his role.

"If you're just saying whatever comes into your mind or publicly announcing it like that, then that can very seriously hurt you," Nnate said. "When the president says something outrageous, or that we see as funny but should be more serious in tone, then that reflects badly on us as a country."

Marcella Mejia, senior at Gavit High School, said Trump's behavior doesn't reflect who America encompasses.

"I think he is a representation of the bad parts of America," Mejia said. "He's a representation of the racial ideas and prejudices that Americans do still have. But that is not all of America."

Jeff Swisher, U.S. government teacher at Gavit High School, said his students' interest in the subject greatly increased as a result of Trump's campaign and election.

"Many of them watched the State of the Union address," Swisher said. "I'll have kids that'll come in and ask me about a news story that has to do with 'well, the president did this,' or 'I read a news story about that.'"

### **An opportunity to learn, discuss**

The negative side of campaigning or rhetoric is something Tom Clark, U.S. history teacher at Lake Central High School, believes shouldn't be shielded away from.

"A lot of our students aren't well-educated about how different people feel," Clark said. "I've seen that some teachers don't want to touch some of that stuff with a 10-foot pole. I'm a teacher, I'm supposed to educate people, make them aware of things. Sugarcoating history isn't teaching history. Tell them the good and the bad."

While Anthony Hofer, social studies department chair at Merrillville High School, doesn't feel interest in U.S. history or government has necessarily increased as a result of the election, he does note students have been able to learn to better interact when related to current events.

Merrillville High School, as a Positive Behavior Intervention Support school, uses tools to guide students toward more positive and civil behavior. Hofer provided students' arguments outside of school on social media as an example.

"When you're out there and debating someone, you're trying to find common ground," Hofer said. "If you approach it a certain way and verbally attack someone on social media, what impact is that going to have? We try to apply it to our political system and political debate."

Michael Gordon, U.S. government teacher at Munster High School, feels that conflict from the presidential election and Trump's first year in office stems from an inability to know how to discuss disagreements.

"We're finding ourselves in a place where people are more interested in being right than actually moving forward," Gordon said. "It's not enough to just vote, you've got to vote well. It's not enough just to speak up, you've got to listen. It's not just enough to speak loudly, you have to have not just discourse, but meaningful discourse."

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