The Presidential Election, National Discourse, and Marin Academy

I wanted to share comments very similar to the ones that I expressed to students during a recent assembly. Although this may be unconventional and outside of the realm of typical engagement of a Head of School, I felt it was important to convey my thoughts.

Whenever I tell people that I am a teacher, an educator, they often bring up the idea that, “schools are not the real world.” And they have a point: I believe that schools should be better than the real world. How else can we prepare our students and your children to be compassionate leaders and engaged citizens? We intentionally set a high bar for integrity, responsibility, and accountability. We also know that students, especially adolescents, are in the process of developing their values and identities, a process which involves a great deal of what we call, trying it on. We set up an environment where students develop a values-based approach to defining who they are, who they will be, and how they will engage in the world.

For the first time in my experience as a Head of School, I am finding my values as an educator are challenged. And the challenge is coming from the upcoming presidential election. As an educator and Head of School, I hold the belief that we have a fundamental responsibility to avoid using our classrooms or positions as a bully pulpit when it comes to politics. As a teacher, I long held as a badge of honor the fact that I could encourage deep and robust debate without revealing my political beliefs. My students used to joke that I had a banker’s face when it came to political arguments.

The circumstances of this election, however, have challenged that position. I find myself trying to reconcile two conflicting and deeply held values: my belief in the need for adults to maintain neutrality when it comes to politics in schools and my commitment to being a values-driven leader and educator. Our focus, after all, is in developing students who can think for themselves. Simultaneously, as educators, we have agreed upon ways of speaking to each other, the values of academic integrity, and the essential nature of respect for individuals and our differences. This season the name-calling and utter disregard for data-driven, fact-based argument has reached an alarming level. Instead, we’ve seen innuendo and opinion parading as facts and truth and remarks that go beyond disparaging or stereotyping. For those of us who have been through many
election cycles, the rhetoric may seem extreme and perhaps something whose effect will end with the tally of votes. For our students, however, who likely do not remember the last contested presidential election, this season’s rhetoric may be disheartening at the very least and damaging or frightening at worst. This impact for our students may far outlast the end of this election. We must all remember that adolescents watch us closely and learn from our actions and our words.

Finally, the language and demeanor of this election, at times, seems to be an assault on quintessential American values regardless of party affiliation. Freedom of speech in our country often comes in conflict with other values. The ability to speak our thoughts freely without the prospect of recrimination is foundational to our democracy; so too is the manner in which we disagree and engage with different points of view. At MA it is our goal to ensure there’s a place at the table for all voices and perspectives. There is always a place at Marin Academy for students whose voices are outside of the dominant discourse, and here our students grow skills in doing so in a way that is both persuasive and respectful. Respect, expressed in both word and deed, is a core value.

It is not lost on me that if our students were to behave in some of the ways that we have witnessed this political season, their actions would earn a clear disciplinary response.

At MA we welcome many voices. Our students and faculty work side-by-side every day immersing themselves deeply in their subjects while honing the ability to think critically and creatively. This election season we will continue to do what we do best:

- Insist on data driven, factually based opinions;
- Create safe classrooms where all voices are welcomed;
- Treat each other with respect in word and deed;
- Hold ourselves and each other responsible for the impact of our words and actions;
- Ensure that our discussions refrain from targeting a particular group, culture, religion, or nationality.

Democracy, by its nature, is a messy endeavor and so, too, is the process of education. That is why Marin Academy must be better than the real world. That is why we must insist on a level of discourse that encourages lively debate without
marginalizing a specific group of people, one that honors different points of view.