

What does advocacy and persuasive writing have to do with finding common ground (in the age of social media and the 24 hour news cycle)?

**by
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In the role of Superintendent, leaders are often tasked with making difficult decisions that can have significant impacts on the communities they serve. In some cases, those decisions can lead to community unity or community crises that require careful communication and community outreach. In every case, the Superintendent's goal is to create a message that is persuasively advocating for a position that finds common ground, especially in polarizing situations where there are two sides to the situation.

Unfortunately, despite the best intentions, Superintendents and educational leaders can find themselves in a position where their message is not well-received, and even becomes a source of contention. This is especially true in today's society with the impact of social media and the 24 hour news cycle. The rise of social media and the information age has had a significant impact on K-12 education, leading to greater polarization, extremism, and a lack of common ground.

As I enter my ninth month as the Superintendent of the Amherst Exempted Village School District, I found myself in this exact position two weeks ago in regards to the now internationally infamous 'Amherst Bus Driver' video. In the immediate hours after the video went viral on social media throughout the world, I released a statement to our parents condemning the actions and words of the bus driver and stated that a full investigation would be taking place. My message was meant to show that the school district would not tolerate such abusive behavior towards children. Everyone was anticipating public backlash against the school district for hiring such an offensive person to drive buses with children and my message was a pre-emptive attempt to assure parents that we were taking the situation seriously and protecting their children.

The difficulty in this situation was that no one predicted that random people on social media would begin creating a narrative that the bus driver was the victim in this case. Within 24 hours, a company created a t-shirt with a percentage of the proceeds going towards the bus driver's retirement fund. The t-shirt company then continued to promote the bus driver and began scheduling interviews with the bus driver on news stations, radio stations, newspapers, etc. The narrative was now set...it was the students on the bus who were the abusers and the bus driver was the innocent victim. And now, the Superintendent's message which was meant to show the public that the school district protects its children was transformed into a message that conveyed that the school district does not protect its bus drivers.

In the article, "Social Media, News Consumption, and Polarization: Evidence from a Field Experiment" by Ro'ee Levy, the author analyzes how social media and algorithms contribute to political polarization by creating echo chambers that reinforce users' existing beliefs and limit exposure to opposing viewpoints. In our 'Amherst Bus Driver' scenario, a specific segment of society created a narrative that was echoed on all social media platforms which was promoted by the mainstream media for attention, views, and followers and promoted by a company simply for profit.

In the advocacy article, "Find Common Ground" on the *building digital power* website, it states "The more polarizing a topic, the more 'common ground' techniques will help you reach the fringes of your audience and keep your message (rather than distracting debates) at the center of attention. Give up now if your aim is to satisfy *everyone*. (You can't. But maybe, you can get close). **The idea is simple: find the intersection of what different factions care about (bold added)**. Frame your message around *that*." It also gives five steps to finding common ground:

- 1. Understand the 'poles' of your audience.** Know their trigger points so you can more effectively navigate around them. Understand what motivates their

positions—are there shared values there? If they are argumentative, what ‘need’ are they attempting to satisfy through debate? There may be ways you can proactively meet that need.

2. Frame ideas around values. Construct messages in ways that puts values and outcomes (not tactics) at the heart of your narrative.

3. Be positive. If parts of your audience are prone to the negative, shift the tone of conversation towards positive, tangible impacts of progress.

4. Don’t judge. Model encouragement and support among your audience. Direct any culpability at a common opposition.

5. Don’t compromise yourself. Building bridges can reach new audiences and foster greater understanding. But trying to please people can lead to ... people pleasing. If you can no longer deliver your message with authenticity, you’ve gone too far.

As I look back on my infamous ‘Amherst Bus Driver’ situation, I am reflecting on what I could have done differently or said differently in my message to parents. I think it would have been wise to try to identify the polar opposite positions of the situation and create “talking points” for each side. With the two sides clearly in focus, I might have found a common ground for my message - both students and the bus driver are in the wrong for their actions. Both sides deserve sympathy and yet both sides deserve ownership or blame.

In every case, the Superintendent’s goal is to create a message that is persuasively advocating for a position that finds common ground, especially in polarizing situations where there are two sides to the situation. You certainly can’t win them all but no one can blame you for trying! Well...