



## AWKWARD CONVERSATIONS GUIDE

A roadmap for engaging and transforming the toxic schools narrative one conversation at a time

We are so glad you're here. We think this resource will be helpful as you navigate the very same conversations and moments that inspired us to create it. Please consider making a contribution [here](#) so we can be sure more resources like this are available in the future

### INTEGRATED SCHOOLS

Through outreach, advocacy, and community building, Integrated Schools mobilizes families - particularly those with racial or economic privilege - to practice antiracist school integration.

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## A GUIDE FOR WHITE PARENTS HAVING THOSE AWKWARD CONVERSATIONS ABOUT SCHOOL INTEGRATION

### YOUR VOICE MATTERS

The “schools” conversation happens everywhere: playgrounds, birthday parties, family get-togethers, even in line to get coffee. For many parents, school choice anxiety is fed by peer pressure, our own insecurities about parenting, and a cultural assumption that our child’s success and happiness in life hinge heavily on our educational choices. It is also steeped in a racially-biased “broken schools” narrative that presumes that public education is failing us, and that schools are either “bad” (common) or “good” (exceptional).

For those of us thinking about integration and racial justice, these conversations can be messy and nuanced and complicated; fraught issues of parenting, community, race, and class are all in play.

This guide is specifically designed to help White parents\* engage in the schools conversation in ways that ultimately transform the toxic schools narrative, one playground encounter at a time. While knowing what to say in the moment is not always easy, we have the power to expose racist ideas and begin to dismantle a White supremacy culture<sup>1</sup> so pervasive that most of our White peers are not even aware of the way it shapes our choices and impacts our society. **Your voice matters.**

### HOW DOES THIS GUIDE WORK?

Drawing on parents’ experiences across the country, this guide groups some of the common questions and concerns that White parents raise about schools into four main topics: **School Quality, Competition & Risk, Social Discomfort, and Safety.** Each of these topics is addressed on a separate page, using the ACT (Affirm-Counter-Transform) approach:<sup>2</sup>

- **Affirm** - meet the other person where they are by affirming shared values.
- **Counter** - offer factual evidence (from research and your own experience) and a different perspective or context that encourages others to examine their assumptions.
- **Transform** - offer an engaging solution or way to re-frame our thinking about the issue or concern.

The common concern statements appear in a column on the left-hand side. Next to this we present a shared value-**affirming** response that integrating parents have found to be a useful pivot point for engagement. In the middle column, the common concerns are matched to suggested **counter** statements (factual evidence, context that de-centers Whiteness & White-normed values) that we can use to encourage our peers to examine their assumptions. In the final column, the initial concern or question is **transformed**, presenting an antiracist<sup>3</sup> framing of the issue.

*\*A similar approach may be useful to anyone engaging this topic with a parenting peer, but the specific examples and suggested responses given here were developed with White parents in mind.*

**This guide is NOT a script!** Don’t feel like you have to memorize the material or be able to cite references at the drop of a GreatSchools rating! The main thing to take from this is that *You Have the Power* to engage in these conversations in a way that changes the way we talk about schools... and integration.

### GENERAL TIPS

- **Ask questions.** How are we defining what is “the best” and “success?” What does it mean to “fit” at a school? These kinds of questions can help pin down the specific worries a parent has, either to address those concerns more specifically or to pull our “coded language” out of the shadows and call attention to the biases that shape our thinking.
- **Share your story.** Anecdotes are not data, but they can be convincing. Framing your responses within your own journey can help, e.g. “Our experience has been...” or “I’ve found at our school...”
- **Practicing antiracist school integration** is a powerful step towards justice, but also requires balance. We want to stop contributing to segregation **and** we believe that these experiences will benefit our kids. But focusing only on why integration is good for White kids slips quickly into a kind of opportunity hoarding; a using kids of color for the benefit of our own. Similarly, focusing on why integration is good for all kids and for democracy quickly becomes sanctimony and White saviorism. It’s a juggling act of *both/and* – and neither too much.
- **Recognize these are tough conversations.** Conversations about Whiteness are difficult. White folks often get defensive and offended by these big truths particularly if they feel unprepared or “set up.” We have been deeply conditioned by our society to avoid engaging in these types of dialogues. Being thoughtful about the timing and the necessary preparation may increase the chances of a successful conversation. Please don’t consider it a failure if someone’s fragility prevents them from considering these ideas in real time. Remember you are “planting seeds” and the person you’re confronting may need time to process the information and perspective you are sharing.

1. For a deeper understanding of the concept of White supremacy culture and how it presents itself in our communities, please explore Tema Okun’s [White Supremacy Culture](#) website.
2. ACT comes from the [Talking About Race Toolkit](#).
3. For a deeper understanding of antiracism, check out Ibram X. Kendi’s [How to Be an Antiracist](#).

## EXAMPLES

## AFFIRM

## COUNTER

## TRANSFORM

SCHOOL QUALITY

“I want my kid to have nice facilities, experienced teachers, field trips...”

“The focus on testing is just terrible.”

“The school is rated so low.”

“With so many English learners, my child won’t get enough attention.”

“I want a school with parent involvement.”

We all want [high quality schools, attention, facilities, etc.] for our kids, AND...

Getting the “best” for my child feels like opportunity hoarding: putting my own child’s benefit above equity and community well-being. ([The Atlantic](#))

While you may be letting go of some material opportunities, integrated school environments promote creativity, motivation, deeper learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving. ([NPR](#))

It is a question of priorities: are we willing to opt out of meaningful integration in order to make sure our child never has to experience test preparation?

Privileged students perform similarly in schools with high and low average scores.

([NYTimes](#), [NPR](#), [Integrated Schools](#))

School ratings are based on state standardized tests and those scores have a high correlation with family income. ([IS Podcast S5E7 Schneider](#))

Integrated schools help all kids experience comfort in diverse settings, encourage empathy, introduce new perspectives, and prepare them to thrive in a multiracial world. ([TCF](#))

The story that Black and Brown parents don’t care about education is rooted in racism and is inaccurate. ([Perry](#), [Rooks](#))

Models of “parent involvement” are based on behavior norms of White middle class parents. ([School Community Journal](#))

I cannot raise my kids in an antiracist way in a White segregated school. Nor can I practice antiracism while curating the diversity in my children’s world. ([Hagerman](#))

Standardized testing came out of the eugenics movement. It continues to suffer from issues of inherent bias and measures only a small sliver of the school experience. ([Kirkland](#), [Au](#))

Multilingual environments make all children better communicators, even if they are not bilingual. ([Psychology Today](#))

With a broader understanding of what “parent involvement” looks like, it is easier to see the ways communities invest in and are committed to their schools. ([EmbraceRace](#))

## EXAMPLES

## AFFIRM

## COUNTER

## TRANSFORM

COMPETITION & RISK

“Don’t you want the best for your child?”

“The job market is rough. I need to set my kid up for success from day one.”

“I don’t want my child to be bored or not challenged.”

“I’m not willing to gamble with my kids’ education.”

“I don’t want my kid to be a social experiment (guinea pig).”

Everyone wants to make sure their kids live a fulfilling life, **AND...**

When we focus on competition and making sure our kids are "in first place," we are harming our communities and sustaining a cultural narrative of White-centered norms and values.

The job market our kids will enter into will place a high value on skills not captured by standardized tests. An integrating school may actually be an important way to set your kids up for success. ([Linda Darling Hammond](#))

Stimulation and rigor shouldn’t be the only goal of an educational experience. Learning how to get along with others and understanding our shared humanity are also important components.

Integration is not untested; we know the positive outcomes it produces. ([Johnson](#))

The assumption that a privileged segregated school leads to better outcomes is rooted in White supremacy culture, specifically glorifying individualism and opportunity hoarding.

Segregation is a social experiment too. ([Rothstein 2017](#)) Our country has been engaged in an intentional, policy-driven, centuries-long social experiment in segregation.

[Desegregating the U.S. military in 1948](#) and [opening combat roles to women](#) were once also described as [social experiments](#).

“What if, instead of ‘the best,’ we are focused on getting what is *healthy* for our child—to receive no end of love and only proportional resources?” ([Martin](#))

Where we think we are giving our kid a “leg up” over other kids, we are cementing a system that keeps other kids out.

While there is no evidence kids test scores suffer from being in integrating schools, we know kids in White segregated schools show increased levels of implicit bias. ([TCF](#))

Integrating schools can liberate us from the high-pressure, helicopter parenting often prevalent in White spaces. ([Calarco](#))

We want our children to have a broad set of values, such as navigating difference, antiracism, equity, belonging, and inclusion.

## EXAMPLES

## AFFIRM

## COUNTER

## TRANSFORM

# SOCIAL DISCOMFORT

“We didn't feel comfortable at that school. It's not a good fit for our family.”

“I don't want my kid to be the only White kid.”

“YOUR kids are built for this, my kids are too [sensitive, awkward, shy, boisterous, etc.]”

“But that school ISN'T diverse [because there are few/no White kids]! I want my kids in a diverse space.”

We all want to be comfortable and feel like we naturally fit into a school community, **AND...**

What makes you uncomfortable in that space? Are you sure your child would also be uncomfortable? Does an easier fit outweigh the benefits of becoming part of an integrated community? ([Integrated Schools Podcast](#))

Leaving a predominantly White &/or privileged environment can be uncomfortable but our kids are growing up in the most racially diverse generation in US history. Experiencing comfort with difference will benefit our kids and society. ([Brookings Institution](#), [TCF](#))

There are anxious, sensitive and rambunctious kids in every school. When parents try to avoid every possible discomfort, they center themselves and limit their children. ([Calarco](#))

The false narratives around students at Black/Brown schools lead us to generalize inevitable challenges as an indictment of the entire school. When similar issues arise in mostly White/privileged schools, we consider it an isolated event - kids being kids.

Valuing diversity as a commodity in this way can be either performative or exploitative and centers whiteness.

A “diverse” school with far more privilege (race, economic, ability, language) than the surrounding community is still concentrating privilege.

We need to be brave about our own discomfort. Once we see that our discomfort lies in us, and not necessarily our kids, then it's easier to envision belonging and be less concerned about “fit”.

“If we're going to have integration, then those of us who have choice have to go into those (segregated) schools.” ([Nikole Hannah-Jones, School Colors Podcast](#))

When our choices actively push against segregation we send the message that our children aren't the only ones whose experiences matter. That is one part of becoming better antiracist adults.

By letting your kid navigate spaces where not everyone comes from the same background, you are making it easier for them to feel comfortable in more diverse settings as an adult.

When White folks center their desires and decide what demographic percentages are acceptable, it centers Whiteness and does nothing to push back against bias, oppressive systems, and harm against communities of color.

EXAMPLES

AFFIRM

COUNTER

TRANSFORM

SAFETY

“I’m worried about drugs.”

“I worry about violence/ I worry my child will get bullied.”

“Kids growing up in poverty have real trauma; while this is terribly sad, I also need to be realistic about the likelihood of classroom disruptions.”

“Have you seen the suspension rates at that school?”

Every parent worries about their child’s safety, AND...

Teen drug use is actually greater among White kids, but White supremacy culture conditions us to assume that it happens more in low income and/or Black and Brown communities. ([SAMSHA](#), [Dev&Psych](#))

Black and Brown kids are unjustly “adultified” by society; they’re perceived and treated as if they need less nurturing, protection, and support, and—as a result—their actions are seen as less innocent. ([CPI](#))

Systemic racism leads us to judge BIPOC through a deficit paradigm. We need to acknowledge both the realities caused by structural racism AND the vibrancy and strength of community. ([Harvard EdCast](#))

If privileged parents segregate our kids, we reinforce the "othering" of kids in poverty. We do not want to contribute to concentrating privilege or concentrating vulnerability. ([Kirkland](#))

Black students are disciplined more often and more harshly than their White peers for similar infractions. ([NYTimes](#)) As a result, statistics on school discipline are rife with racial bias.

By being in community we are more equipped to push against false narratives and structural racism to support meaningful change while focusing on the traditionally marginalized perspectives in these systems.

Bias shapes us and creates anxieties about conflicts that haven't yet happened. When we are in community and practicing antiracism, we can work through challenging interactions because we see the full humanity of others.

By being in community, we are able to extend to all children the same empathy and individual inquiry that we want people to offer ours.

Together with communities of color, White families can be a part of important relationships and alliances that support equity-driven educational policy.

Adding our White voices to a consensus that systems should change can happen when we are actively building relationships and engaged in community.