

After last week's board meeting, I felt it necessary to comment on the increasing acrimony in the tone of our community dialogue. For months now, citizens who approach the board during the public comment period, have resorted to raised voices to express their opinions. Last week was not the first time that we have had an outburst during public comment. We have had members of the audience shout out at board members and at those at the podium, ignoring the rules of conduct during public meetings. I do not pass judgment on an individual's motives or question their right to speak freely and can only conclude that these outbursts are fueled by a passion for the topic or perhaps more commonly, an interest for the welfare of our children or an individual student.

Civility is much more than just behaving politely. Civil behavior shows that we have respect for others and their opinions, especially when we disagree. The exercise of self-control is central to civil discourse and demonstrates an investment in the institutions we share responsibility to care for as a civil society, from the PTO all the way to Congress.

Today, civil behavior is far too rare in all aspects of our lives together. It is missing in interactions that we have in business dealings, it is missing in social interactions and, above all, it is missing in the discourse of our nation's political leaders.

What accounts for our current lack of civility? One of the strongest contributors is the advancement of media and technology which has driven the polarization of our culture

among racial, socio-economic, religious, generation and – particularly—political lines.

In turn, we tend to seek information from sources that conform to our ideology. Over time, lack of exposure to a range of opinions leaves us with less in common with each other. In his book “The Big Sort,” Bill Bishop describes an America where we are spending less time with those unlike ourselves in every aspect of our lives. Research shows that as we increasingly find ourselves inside these likeminded groups, our views can grow more extreme and we naturally begin to demonize the “other.”

Perhaps it is symptomatic of the culture in which we live; a culture in which social media has emboldened individuals to abandon civility in order to make their voice heard. One in which anger is the prevailing emotion, whether it be manifested in incidents of road rage or impatience waiting in line at the grocery store or frustration with the state of education in Arizona. Tonight, during our study session, we shared our achievement data and the level of detail we are monitoring to ensure that ALL students in the Kyrene district are growing academically. We can do better and that is the focus of our work.

I am reminded of my impressions of the Kyrene community when I first became superintendent. The level of community involvement, support from local businesses, the strength of the parent organizations in our schools was unlike anything I have seen in my 40 years in education. One need only look to the

successful passage of two overrides and a bond measure last fall, or the speed with which the community responded to the launch of Purposity, one of the fastest the organization has ever seen in reaching the threshold of participation for evidence of the strength of the support we have from our citizens.

This is a community that cares deeply about its schools, about its students. Differences of opinion and constructive criticism intended to inform or redirect our policies and program are welcomed. But we must always conduct ourselves in a respectful and civil manner because our children are watching.

Recently, former President Barack Obama, in his eulogy to his political rival, Sen. John McCain, said, "So much of our politics, our public life, our public discourse can seem small and mean and petty, trafficking in bombast and insult and phony controversies and manufactured outrage. It's politics that pretends to be brave and tough, but in fact is born of fear." I would invite us all in Kyrene to put aside our fears and instead reach for the courage within each of us to tackle the tough issues before us. Let us find the common ground on which we can work together to build a better Kyrene.

I feel it necessary to remind the public that the purpose of governing board meetings is to conduct the business of the District. It is not intended to be used as a community forum or debate. It is important for all community members to feel welcome and safe in the Board's business meetings. Just as we expect our students to be respectful of each other, audience

members will be expected to treat all attendees with respect and civility.

I'm calling tonight for the end of the divisiveness in this Board room because it does not reflect well on the community which we represent, the community that we serve.

So to those in this room, to those watching the live stream, or who will watch the recording at their convenience, and all of those who love this district, I ask that we stop the ugliness. Our kids deserve that much and they are counting on us to do better