

## Mangala Jagadeesh: Teachers have varying perspectives

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I am saddened by the climate in our country today. I am saddened by the climate in our town today. The “us” vs. “them” mentality is pervasive — at times empowering and at times demoralizing.

When we feel passionate about something, we often believe we are the ones with the reasoned arguments and if the other side would only just listen and think about it, they would come to the same conclusions as us. We believe we have taken into account the various perspectives and come to the best decision. We have to believe that, or we would be paralyzed by indecision.

For some, the “lively discussion” is a way to share and hear ideas and learn from each other. For some, it is a way to convince people of their arguments. For some, listening and thinking about what they hear helps them most. For some, hearing a passionate argument feels like an attack. For some, speaking up is hard.

In our classrooms we make safe spaces for discussions to happen. We make sure everyone participates and we put structures in place to hear from those who don't feel comfortable speaking up.

As adults, we don't always have the power to make that happen.

We are tasked in our town with making a decision about what kind of physical structures we want and need to make this very important job of teaching our children happen. We are engaged in a battle over whether the current plan to build a new school will further that goal.

And it is this decision that is tearing us apart.

Some say that teachers were misrepresented at the last Town Meeting when a vote to authorize borrowing for this school was made. After the failed vote, some teachers organized to try to give voice to teachers. The newly released petition purports to now represent the true views of teachers. At its very best, it gives voice to teachers who hadn't had this opportunity before. At its very worst, it gives voice, amplified, to those who used their workplace, our schools, to organize, and silences the voices of those in the schools who may disagree. It makes people feel

empowered, silenced, nervous, harassed, and a host of other feelings.

What should have been done, and was asked for by some teachers and parents, was a survey where teachers could express their views freely and without influence, especially from their supervisors and colleagues who had already formed opinions. This didn't happen.

Those who supported the administration's proposal organized, and used their workplace to collect signatures. They used their workplace to urge employees to make signs, and “paint the picture that a large portion of the community is behind it.”

Those who didn't support the administration's proposal didn't organize. As the climate at the school started to become uncomfortable, some reached out to administration to put a stop to it. It wasn't stopped.

Those who weren't in the schools can't know what actually happened. Those who were in the schools have differing perspectives on how it played out. We hear from the supporters saying that no coercion happened, and that people who felt coerced should speak up – missing the point that when this kind of activism happens in the schools, with the implicit support of administration, those who don't support the administration are put in a very uncomfortable position. We can support them privately, but we can't ask them to put their names out there, when a very real concern exists that their jobs will be affected. When there is a power differential, real or perceived, between those collecting names and those being asked to sign, we can't just take it at face value.

None of this is meant to delegitimize the real desire that teachers have for better school buildings or the genuine support many/some have for the current proposal. Rather, my goal is to ensure that community members are aware of the diversity of opinions and the obstacles and fears that prevent some of those opinions from being heard.

The current situation is dividing us, as a town, as families, and as teachers. So where do we go from here? There is no clear answer. We need a plan that will bring us together as a community. We need a plan that supports what we want for our children for the next 50 years.

We need to start over, and do it right this time.

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