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Something is disappearing in our society. We are losing public argument—the ability and space for the expression of civil and respectful differences of perspective or opinion on public issues.

Civil argument is the stuff of a functioning democracy. It is the basis for constructive engagement by those who share common interests and beliefs—and different opinions about the real policy options. It is this public discussion and argument that shapes good policy and political decisions and it is disappearing. The danger is that we may be re-creating this same kind of dysfunction in our local public spaces.

So, what is the solution?

Respectful Discussion

We must work to preserve civil discussion in our own lives and workplaces. In the school setting, teachers, school administrators, and school board members can certainly attack, disparage, and criticize each other, but the reality is that the next day teachers will return to teach, administrators will manage the schools, and school board members will face new policy decisions—all working towards their fundamental belief in the mission and value of public education.

Voicing tired assumptions that management is the enemy of the employees, employees are fundamentally self-interested shirkers, or that policy-makers are uninformed amateurs is not only wearisome and pointless, it masks the common ground shared by all three roles that could be used to build productive relationships and improved policy.

The challenge is to find and build upon the foundation of common interests and to respect the differences in how those interests are viewed and understood. This does not mean a reduction in argument or discussion. It means a shift to respectful discussion that is intended to result in a material improvement in public policy and decision-making.

Many people may believe that the labor-management relationship is inherently contentious and conflictual. I disagree. We could certainly emulate the national situation in which there is a continuing loss of public space for civil discussion.

We could also take rigid positional stands that prevent anything but a back-and-forth trade of ideological attacks against the other's position. Instead, my colleagues and I challenge ourselves to work to preserve the space for the kind of argument and inquisitive discussion that moves us to find a common ground for our fundamentally shared interests.

The Shaking of Hands

When I meet with the executive directors of the Nebraska Council of School Administrators and the Nebraska Association of School Boards, we always, always, begin the meetings by shaking hands.

We are friends as well as professional colleagues. The handshake symbolically reminds us of that. Yes, we almost always engage in argument. We have different perspectives, different experiences, different roles, and represent different constituencies. But we also go to our respective offices each day and work towards the same fundamental goals and mission.

Our associations have not always had this kind of collegial connection. It takes work and intention to sustain a successful and productive relationship between the three associations.

We do argue about the specifics of policy directions, but we never make personal attacks or make general, ideological arguments. And we end our arguments as friends with a handshake.

I invite teachers, school administrators, and school board members in Nebraska to work to make this happen in every community. It is in our common—and best—interest.