T
hen-U.S. Senate candidate Abraham Lincoln spoke these words in June 1858 in Springfield, Ill. His words reflected his perception of the deep divisions in the United States, a nation “half slave and half free,” as he described in that same speech, which was delivered less than three years prior to the Civil War that would begin just months into his presidency.

Fast forward to 2021 and political and racial polarization is once again wreaking havoc and splintering local communities. Except today, many of the battle lines are drawn between competing versions of the facts.

Society has gotten to a place in which we sometimes cannot even discuss principles or strategies because we are stuck arguing about basic, provable or disprovable facts. Reflecting this nadir in our national dialogue, CNN’s #FactsFirst campaign aired a public service advertisement featuring a picture of an apple and a voiceover that says: “This is an apple. Some people might try to tell you it’s a banana.”

Having worked in politics, government, public policy and school communications in the District of Columbia, Pennsylvania, Vermont and Wisconsin for more than 25 years, I’ve watched the politics of mutually assured destruction take root and expose our often threadbare national fabric. The breakdown of democratic and social norms has unleashed anger and resentment that was long bubbling beneath the surface of American life.

In recent years, tensions boiled over amidst instances of police brutality, including the murder of George Floyd; the polarizing presidency of Donald Trump; and rebellion against the health and safety requirements necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Wisconsin has seen its own share of division over the past 10 years, evidenced by the historic protests against Gov. Scott Walker and Act 10, the ongoing political battles between the state Legislature and Gov. Tony Evers, and last year’s police shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha that precipitated protests and additional violence and bloodshed.

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these choppy waters, as the divisions are deep and the turbulence is not going away. Schools are continually at risk of being drawn into these battles.

On the heels of fights over school reopenings and mask mandates this past school year, districts in Wisconsin and across the country are taking heat over issues related to equity.

Last year, the National School Boards Association launched the DIRE initiative to assist state school board associations and school districts in addressing racial inequities in education. Many districts across the country are engaged in diversity, equity and inclusion work because they believe in valuing and affirming the identities and perspectives of all individuals. They recognize they must provide equitable opportunities for every student.

Certain critics — sometimes purposefully, sometimes unintentionally — conflate a focus on educational equity intended to close achievement gaps with Critical Race Theory, an academic concept centered on the idea that racism is a social construct rather than due solely to individual bias or prejudice. Whether one agrees or disagrees with CRT, educators have a responsibility to ensure that all children have a sense of belonging and are fully included in their school community.

The Donovan Group, a Wisconsin-based national school communication firm, believes that effective communication begins with transparency and engaging one’s community. As public education leaders, these should be our starting points, even in tumultuous times.

For school districts, engagement and assessment are critical.

Do stakeholders have an opportunity to address the school board?
Do families feel heard within their individual school and the district community?
Do taxpayers feel they receive communication from the district and have access to sufficient information about the district budget?
Are your stakeholders given opportunities to weigh in via regular surveys of communications (and other topics)?

Does your district have a communications plan with measurable objectives and that is regularly refined based on stakeholder feedback?

Survey data can be useful to capture a baseline and track improvement over time. Surveys we administer on behalf of school districts typically ask a series of questions specific to communication practices, as well as “right track/wrong track” responses. An example of this latter type of question is a five-point Likert scale item (with responses being strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree and strongly disagree):

“I am satisfied with the information I receive from the school district.”
“I feel welcome in the school district.”

Prior to the pandemic, the 2019 State of K-12 Customer Experience survey of 500 educational leaders suggested that nearly all aspired to build trust with their stakeholders, but too few were confident in their district’s ability to deliver on that goal.

The survey found that 90% of school and district leaders say that building community trust is critical to the mission of their organizations, but only 52% believe their districts could effectively accomplish it. Similarly, engaging parents and community members (81%) and effective crisis communications (80%) were cited among the most important communications objectives. Only a bare majority of school leaders felt their districts could do these things effectively.

Our experience is that effective school district communication requires a mix of intention, planning and skill from school districts.

First and foremost, district leaders must be committed to transparent and intentional communica-

Alana Leffler has been promoted to a Shareholder

Alana’s practice focuses on advising public and private schools in the areas of general school law, special education law, and labor and employment law. She regularly counsels clients on topics such as: student discipline; bullying, harassment, and discrimination complaints.
tion. When that mindset exists, we find that good things happen and difficult situations can be avoided.

Second, effective communication requires a strategic approach. An annual communication plan can provide such a roadmap for a school district with key messages, core strategies, a list of tactics, a calendar of deliverables and a set of performance metrics.

Finally, truly effective communication often requires more than just good intentions and a solid plan. It also blossoms from learned effort or professional management. Many districts are able to employ a communications director or manager. Some larger districts may even support a communications office.

Sometimes disengaging is OK, too. School districts cannot let themselves get drawn too deeply into contemporary issue battles and disagreements that are unlikely to be solved. Social media is a forum that should be leveraged and monitored by districts, but perhaps also one that is not the best medium for thoughtful dialogue. As appropriate, redirect inquiries or complaints to other channels and address them on an individual basis.

Sometimes, real crises do emerge from these contentious issues. When that occurs, it’s time for district leaders to engage thoughtfully by gathering the facts, lining up their team and prioritizing their contacts.

There always will be critics of public schools and school districts. Some of this critique is healthy and productive, elevating the work of school boards and local control of education. Increasingly, some of it is unfortunately destructive and wanton.

If you attend to purposefully communicate and engage with your community over the long haul, it will grow an atmosphere of trust, goodwill and mutual respect in your district community. As educational leaders and school board members, that foundation will serve you well during times of challenge and crisis.

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To learn more about the Donovan Group, visit donovan-group.com/wisconsin or awsa.memberclicks.net/crisis-communications.