

DIALOGUE for UNDERSTANDING

By NPC Director Dr. Terry L. Roberts

The National Paideia Center is dedicated to the universal advancement of Justice, Equity, and Social Consciousness. This rising tide of awareness and proactive engagement must include the issue of equity as it extends to racial attitudes and beyond to justice on all levels of society. At the National Paideia Center, we offer a set of practical dialogue strategies that are designed to raise self-awareness and teach deeper understanding in complex communities, but especially in schools.

On April 20, 1999, a school shooting and attempted bombing occurred at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. The perpetrators, two twelfth grade students, murdered 12 students and one teacher before committing suicide. At the time, we were working in a large, urban high school in New Jersey. On the day after the Columbine massacre, the students came to school and asked the teachers to arrange a school-wide Paideia Seminar about the alienation and fear in their own school. They knew what they needed, and they asked for it.

There are two things that stand out about this moment: one, it was the students, who had been trained in Paideia Seminar participation, who demanded that the school suspend business as usual to allow them to practice dialogue for understanding and reconciliation; and two, that same phenomenon of students demanding genuine dialogue has happened countless times since, when our nation has been wracked by especially frightening events of social and cultural violence. And now, once again, the murder of George Floyd while in the custody of Minneapolis police provides stark evidence of human brutality at all levels of our society. Civil protest is called for ... and something beyond civil protest.

In order to combat insensitivity and violence, we believe the adults and students in every school should practice the following **Dialogue Principles** to gain understanding, wisdom, and empathy:

- ❖ All voices in the school community can and should be encouraged, heard, and valued
- ❖ All members of the school community can and should learn to listen with a genuinely open mind
- ❖ All can and should learn to avoid the trap of oppositional thinking
- ❖ All can and should learn to express disagreement respectfully and thoughtfully
- ❖ All can and should hear disagreement without becoming defensive
- ❖ All can and should accept responsibility for examining statements critically and creatively
- ❖ All can and should learn to seek the larger truth contained in multiple perspectives
- ❖ All can and should collaborate in the collective construction of knowledge
- ❖ All can and should grow in understanding by continuously challenging themselves and others

We know that mastering the skills of Paideia Seminar participation encompassed in these principles requires dedication and practice. However, they are the skills that empower both the individual and the group to deal with the urgent and complex challenges presented by our society. It is imperative that we develop these skills in ourselves and our students so our **dialogue for understanding** can grow into a **dialogue of unification!**