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# ACIS Heads Roundtable

*Brad Rathgeber*



I'm Brad Rathgeber  
President & CEO  
One Schoolhouse

I started my career in higher education administration, but found work that I loved in independent schools. I started by teaching high school history and art history. Then, I worked as a technology director and a lower school division director. Back in 2009, I helped to create what is now One Schoolhouse. I love my job and the work I do supporting independent schools.



## We're One Schoolhouse.

We partner with independent schools to advance your diverse approaches to education.

## We partner with you.

We meet independent schools where you are and build intentional, collaborative partnerships with Academic Leaders.

## We're designed for you.

We create programs, products, and services for Academic Leaders in independent schools and support your work with heads of schools, students, teachers, and parents.

## Our values underlie all our work.

Build for belonging - Empower learners - Act with integrity - Embrace iteration - Redefine excellence



# Academic Program for Students

Engaging and challenging courses facilitated by expert teachers to supplement work on campus.

# Association for Academic Leaders

Connecting academic deans, department leaders, division heads and others to community, learning, and resources.

# Goals for Today

## *ACIS Heads Roundtable*

- #1 Goal: Talk to and learn from your fellow Heads of School — time like this is precious
- Give you data, insights, and reframing that can be helpful when working on two key issues of the day: Student Mental Health and Community Polarization
- Disclaimer: I know everything I say and offer this afternoon won't be 100% relevant to your school's situation — we're independent schools, so of course not everything will apply to you. But, I hope that there are a few nuggets you can take home that will be helpful.

# Student Mental Health

*Brad Rathgeber*



# 2024 Insight Report

The Association for  
Academic Leaders

# 2024 Insight Report

*Technological Change*

*Pandemic-Accelerated Transformation*

*Erosion of Social Cohesion and Social Capital*



**Workforce  
Development  
Student  
Mental Health  
Generative AI  
Community  
Polarization**

**The Larger Forces**

**The Impact on Independent Schools**

**Reframing the Work**



Workforce  
Development  
**Student  
Mental Health**  
Generative AI  
Community  
Polarization

## The Larger Forces

*The adolescent experience has changed.*

## The Impact on Independent Schools

*Students' mental health challenges are interfering with their ability to learn, and schools and teachers find themselves authentically challenged as they try to serve students well.*

## Reframing the Work

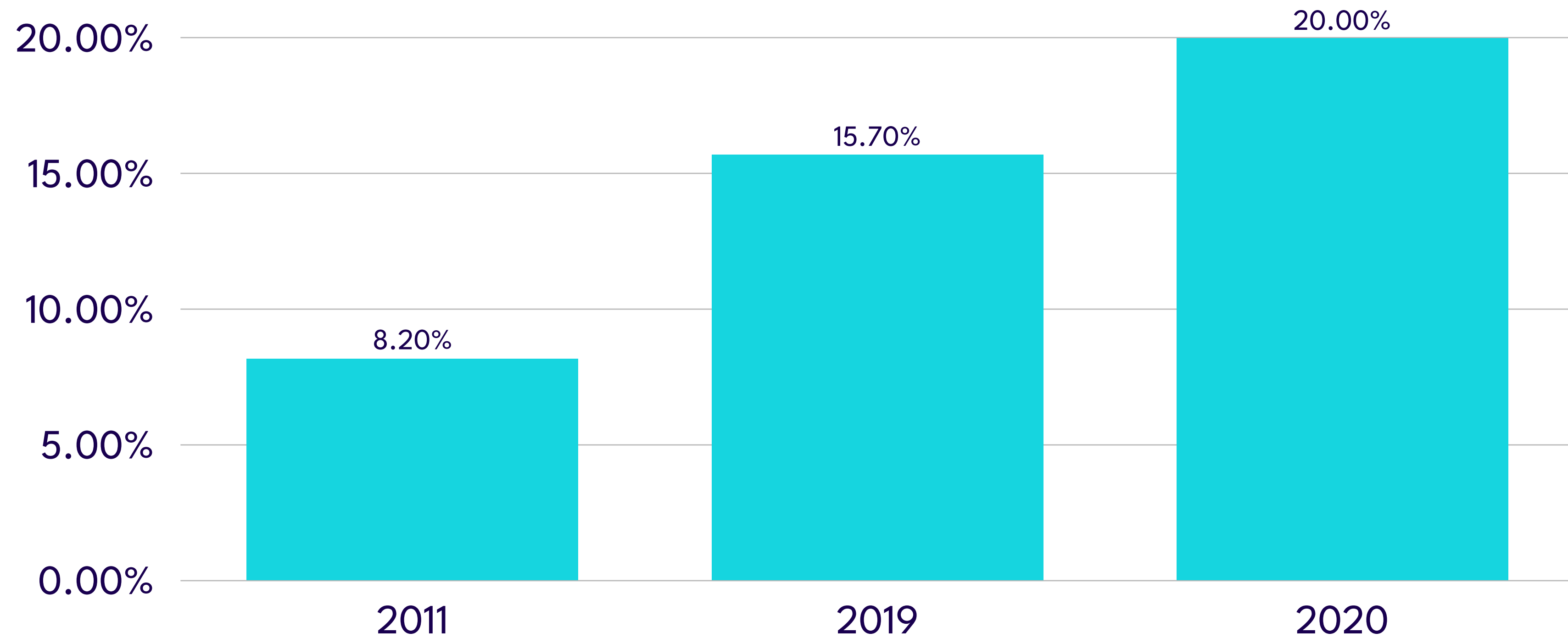
*Address the forces not the impact*

# The Larger Forces

*The adolescent experience has changed*

*Larger Force: The Adolescent Experience has Changed*

# Major Depressive Episodes



Source: CDC, 2023



*Larger Force: The Adolescent Experience has Changed*

# Teen Social Media Use

2014-2015

YouTube

52%

Facebook Users

71%

2023

Instagram

59%

Snapchat

60%

TikTok

63%

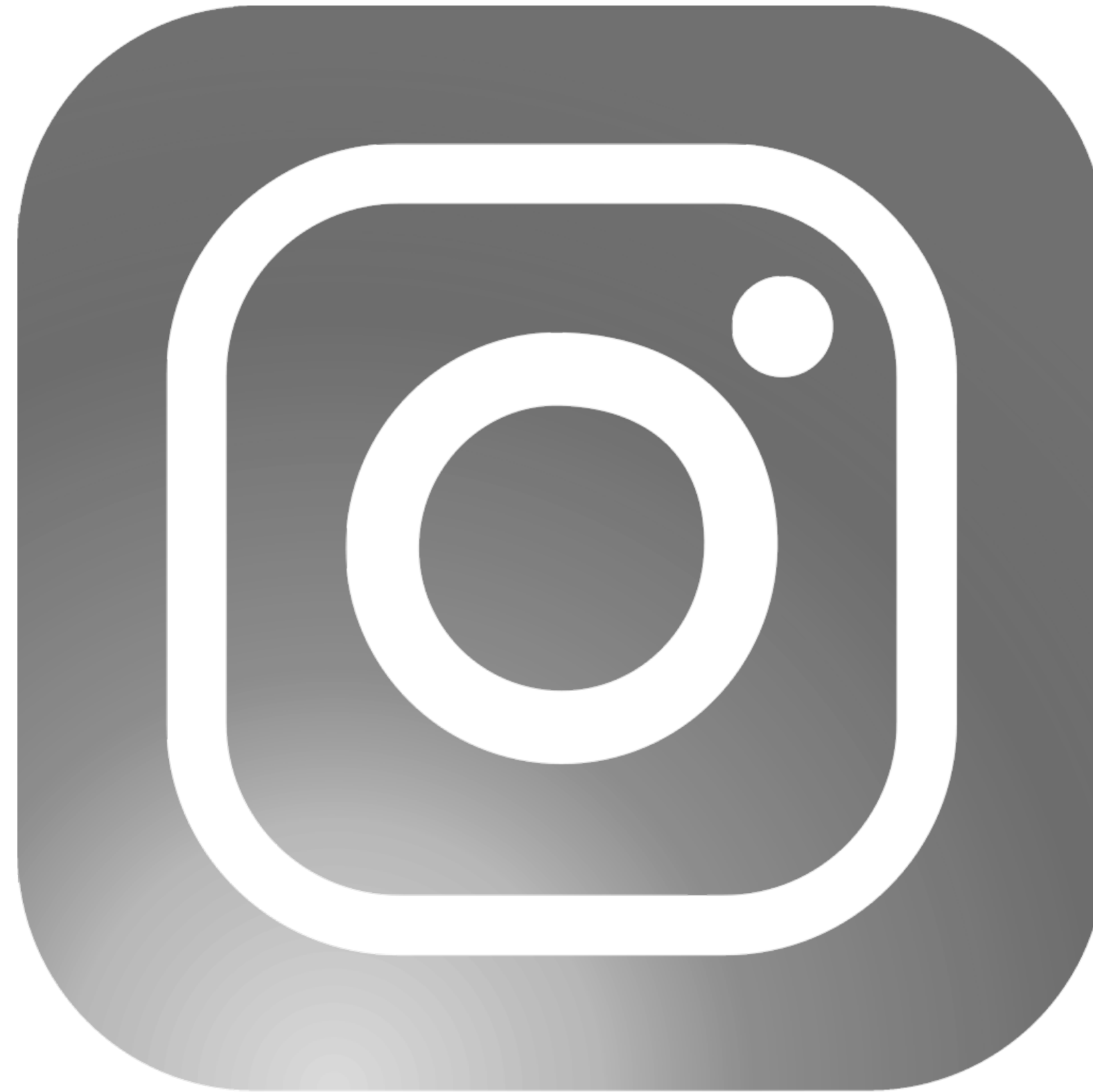
YouTube

93%

Source: Pew Research, 2023

*Larger Force: The Adolescent Experience has Changed*

## Focus on Instagram



*Source: Wall Street Journal, 2023*

*Larger Force: The Adolescent Experience has Changed*

# Particularly Vulnerable Ages

**11-13**  
For Girls

**14-15**  
For Boys

*Source: Nature Communications, 2022*

*Larger Force: The Adolescent Experience has Changed*

# Adult Help

“[Adults] don’t know how to help... [they] came of age in a time before smartphones and social media, but social media has fundamentally changed the landscape of adolescence.”

*Source: Wall Street Journal, 2021*

# The Impact

*Students' mental health challenges are interfering with their ability to learn, and schools and teachers find themselves authentically challenged as they try to serve students well.*



*The Impact: Schools Find Themselves Authentically Challenged as They Try to Serve Students Well*

# Understanding Mental Health

“Emotional health [is] having the right feelings at the right time and being able to manage those feelings effectively.”

*Source: The Emotional Lives of Teenagers, 2023*



*The Impact: Schools Find Themselves Authentically Challenged as They Try to Serve Students Well*

# Role of School Counselors





*The Impact: Schools Find Themselves Authentically Challenged as They Try to Serve Students Well*

# Impact on the Classroom



# Pair and Share

*How are the larger forces and impact manifesting at your schools today? What are you trying to do about them?*

# Reframing the Work

*Address the forces, not the impact*

# Promote Mental Wellness

- From “how do we help this student?” to “how do we make sure fewer students are struggling?”
- Academic Leaders can respond to adolescence’s new challenges by creating systems that promote mental wellness for all students and identify students at risk before problems escalate and impact their academic, emotional, and social well-being.





# Primary Prevention

- **Goal:** Support wellness and prevent the illness from developing
- **Interventions:** Preventative, broad-based, and less resource-intensive
- **Expertise Required:** Professionals with a broader range of skill sets
- **Ratio:** Small team to an entire population

# Secondary Prevention

- **Goal:** Monitor high-risk individuals and detect the illness at an early stage
- **Interventions:** Proactive, targeted, and standardized
- **Expertise Required:** Trained and proficient professionals
- **Ratio:** Few professionals to a large group of patients

# Tertiary Prevention

- Set clear expectations for performance and standards for teaching and learning.
- Align professional development to expectations and standards.
- Commit to reviewing all faculty and staff members that they manage at least annually.

# Student Mental Health: Scenario

After attending a talk and book signing event with Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Anxious Generation*, a group of parents was inspired to advocate for a school-wide ban on cellphones. These parents argue that removing cellphones would decrease anxiety and distraction, fostering better mental health and academic focus among students. This event also sparked a counter-movement from another group of parents who insist that cellphones are crucial for safety and educational purposes, providing necessary access to digital resources and communication in emergencies.

Amid this burgeoning parental debate, the school's teaching staff has also found themselves divided on the issue. Some teachers support the ban, noting a marked improvement in student engagement and reduced classroom disruptions when cellphones are not present. They believe that a ban could cultivate a more attentive and interactive learning environment. Conversely, other teachers argue that cellphones, when used responsibly, can be a valuable educational tool. They point to apps and internet access that can enhance learning experiences, aid in research, and foster digital literacy skills essential for modern education.

# Questions for Your Team

- How do cultural perceptions and stigma around mental health influence your school's approach to student wellness?
- What assumptions does your school hold about students' ability to navigate social media responsibly?
- What are the underlying assumptions about the level of academic pressure deemed acceptable or necessary for success?

# Community Polarization

*Brad Rathgeber*



Workforce  
Development  
Student  
Mental Health  
Generative AI  
**Community  
Polarization**

## The Larger Forces

*The nature of work has changed since 2020*

## The Impact on Independent Schools

*It's harder to hire and retain educators*

## Reframing the Work

*Address the forces not the impact*

# The Larger Forces

*Algorithms surround people with echo chambers, limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints and diminishing our capacity to manage disagreement and discomfort*

*Larger Force: Algorithms surround people with echo chambers*

# Bowling Alone

“What I wrote in Bowling Alone is even more relevant now. Because what we’ve seen over the last 25 years is a deepening and intensifying of that trend. We’ve become more socially isolated, and we can see it in every facet in our lives.”

*Source: NY Times, July 2024*



*Larger Force: Algorithms surround people with echo chambers*

# Internet Use

1995

19%

2023

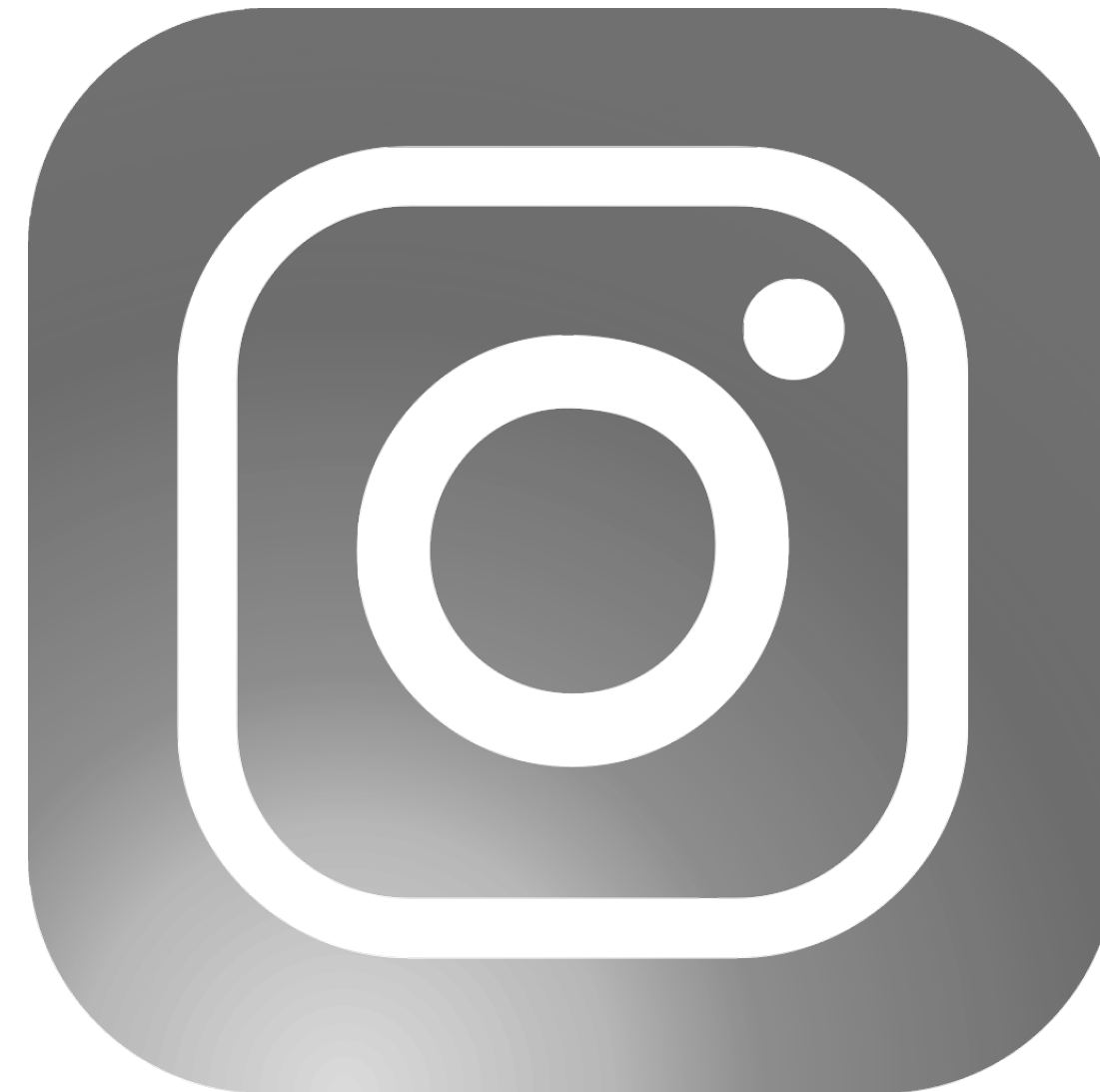
95%

*Source: Pew Research, 2024*



*Larger Force: Algorithms surround people with echo chambers*

## Effects of Social Media

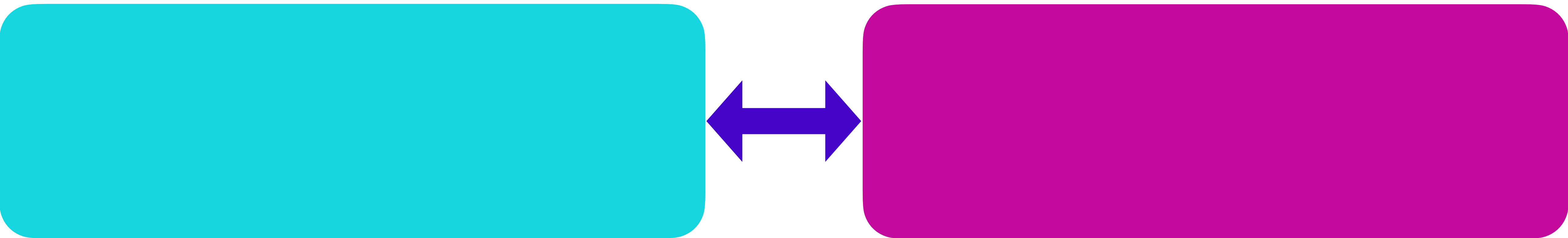


**Tik Tok**

*Source: Pew Research, 2022*

*Larger Force: Algorithms surround people with echo chambers*

# Political Polarization

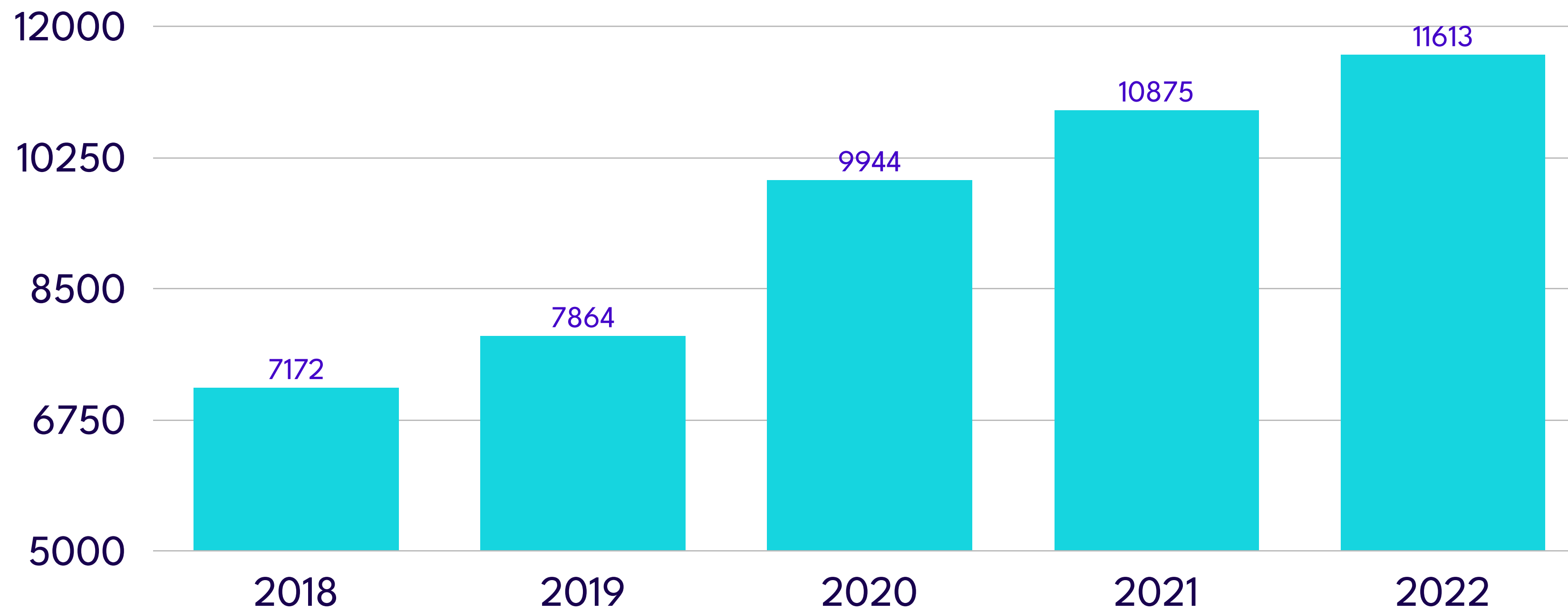


*Source: The 74, October 2023*



*Larger Force: Algorithms surround people with echo chambers*

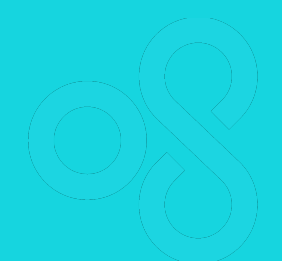
# Rise in Hate Crimes



*Source: FBI, 2024*

# Pair and Share

*What did you already know? What surprised you? What other larger forces are you talking about at school?*



# The Impact

*Tough conversations are avoided or quickly  
turn heated*

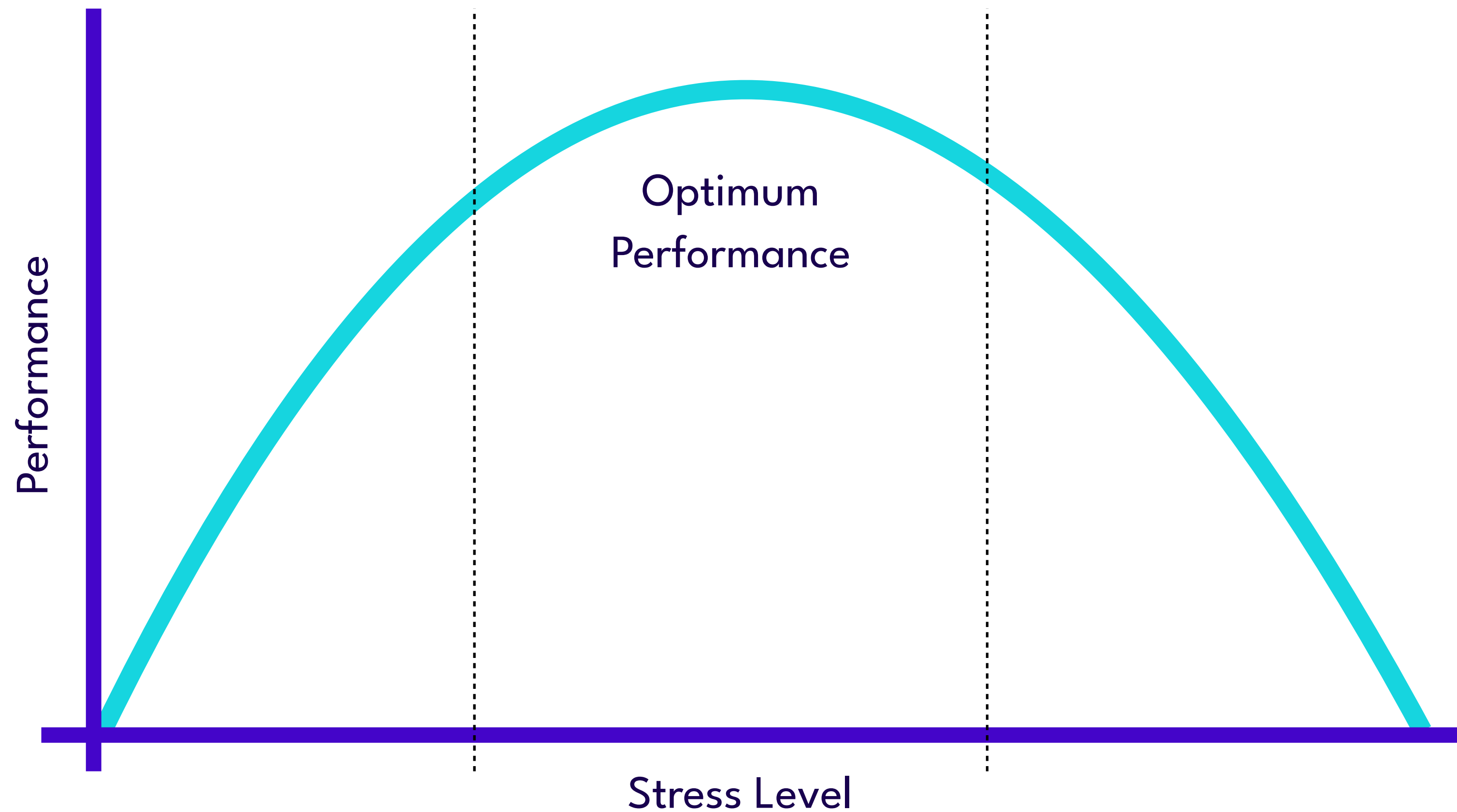
*The Impact: Tough conversations are avoided or quickly turn heated*

# Performative Disagreement

- In classrooms, genuine discussion can be overshadowed by performative disagreement, where participants are focused on winning an argument.
- The goal becomes silencing the other side with rhetorical force rather than seeking common ground or refining one's own perspective.
- It becomes progressively harder to hold a dissenting view.

*The Impact: Tough conversations are avoided or quickly turn heated*

# Balancing Stress and Engagement



*The Impact: Tough conversations are avoided or quickly turn heated*

# Social Risks of Disagreement

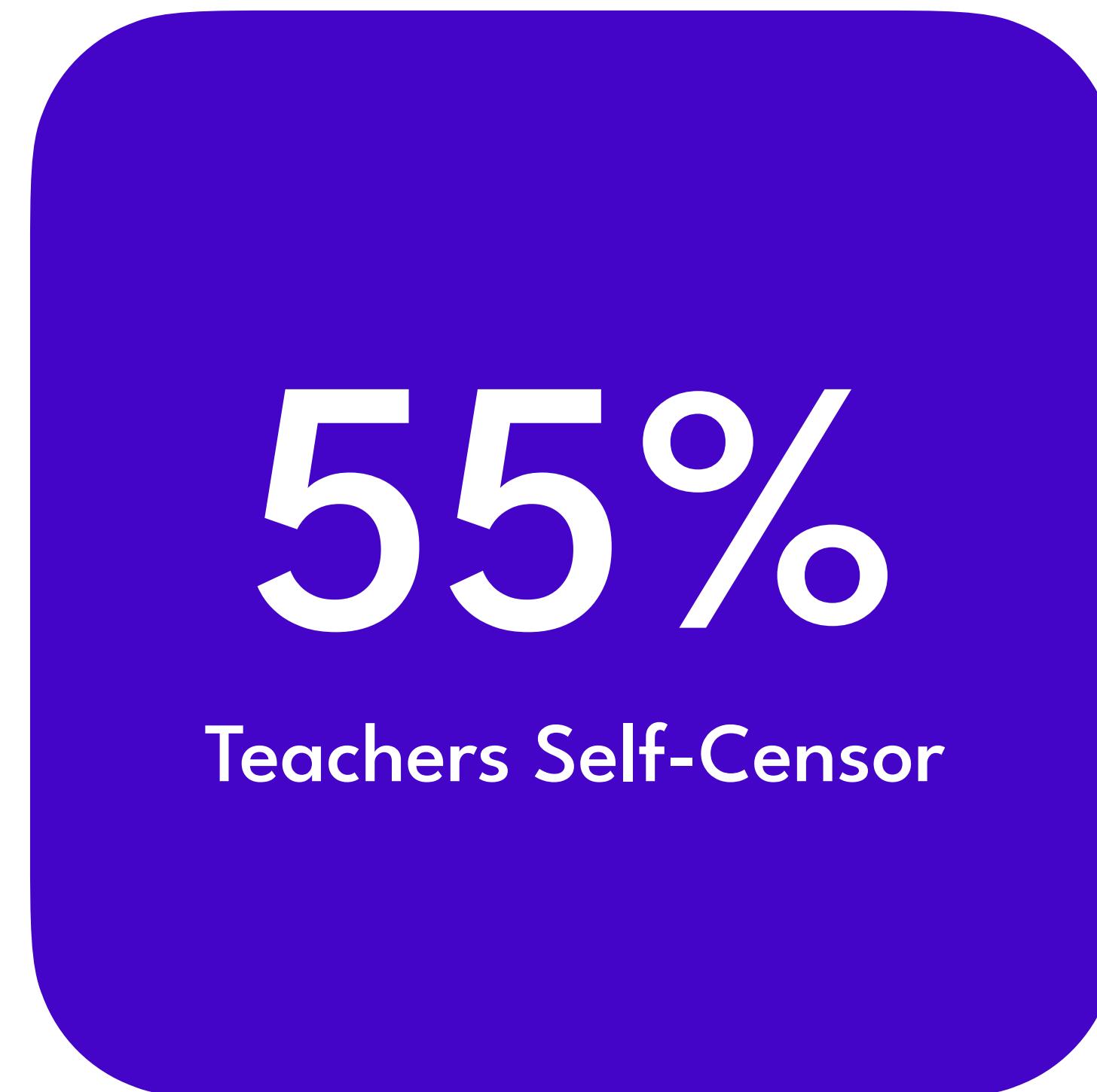


*Sources: Journal of Youth Studies, 2020  
Journal of Moral Education, 2005*



*The Impact: Tough conversations are avoided or quickly turn heated*

## Self-Censorship



*Source: RAND, State of the American Teacher Survey, 2023*

*The Impact: Tough conversations are avoided or quickly turn heated*

## Spaces for Belonging

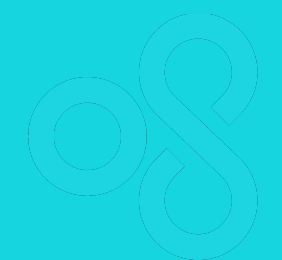
“Facilitated discussions about race can serve as a protective factor for children of color. Conversely, avoiding these topics can leave them feeling more vulnerable to discrimination. In addition, Schools with higher levels of open classroom discussion had students who were more likely to endorse gender equality,... hold higher levels of support for equal rights for all ethnic groups, ... and show greater support for equal rights for immigrants.”

*Sources: Race and Pedagogy Journal, 2023*

*IEA Research for Education, 2018*

# Pair and Share

*What impacts are you seeing on campus –  
right now?*



Association  
for Academic  
Leaders

# Reframing the Work

*Address the forces, not the impact*

# Dilemmas and Problems

- Problems have clear solutions, but dilemmas involve tough choices and lack a single "correct" answer.
- Educators can lead discussions that explore the complexities of the issue, weigh different viewpoints, and find common ground.



*Address the Forces: Reframing the Work*

# Set Community Norms

- Focus on building understanding, not winning victories.
- Respectful disagreement teaches participants to acknowledge and address arguments without personal attacks.

# Cognitive Dissonance Can Be Productive

- Students lose out on vital developmental opportunities when their ideas aren't challenged.
- By the time they reach high school their beliefs have become a core part of their identity, and conflicts can feel personal.
- When educators lead developmentally appropriate discussions about polarized topics, students can learn to navigate this dissonance productively.

# Tell Teachers You Have Their Backs

- Academic Leaders need to explicitly commit to fostering and supporting open dialogue on polarizing topics.
- Academic Leaders also need to provide opportunities for faculty to both have and debrief these conversations in order to model productive disagreement and practice metacognitive skills.
- Proactive communication with students and families is also crucial. The school should clearly articulate its values regarding discourse, respect, diversity, and belonging, along with its unwavering support for addressing these topics in the classroom.

# Lean Into Your Community's Values

- Thriving schools are rooted in core values like intellectual curiosity, empathy, and integrity.
- By wrestling with the complexities of these issues and the ethical dilemmas involved, students are encouraged to examine their own values and develop the courage to stand up for what they believe in, even when it's difficult.
- A curriculum that reflects these core values fosters a sense of agency and civic responsibility in students. It empowers them to actively participate in shaping their world.

*Schools need to commit to and become comfortable with being places of dialogue and productive discomfort.*

# Insight to Action

## Scenario

You receive an email from a parent who has students in two divisions at your school. She informs you that she recently attended a neighborhood meeting where she was given a list of books that the host said were pornographic and advised that parents ask their school administrators to remove these from bookshelves. She wants to know that the school is not putting “filth” on the shelves. She does say that she is willing to read any of the books on the list that you feel have merit to be in the classroom or library before she opts her children out of reading the book. You realize that you don’t know very much about the books on the list. When you check, there are several in the library and two of the books appear on reading lists for courses in your middle and upper divisions.



# Insight to Action

## Questions for Your Team

- What assumptions does your school hold regarding political and social dialogue within the community?
- How should the role of education evolve in response to increasing societal polarization? What foundational beliefs about education's role in society might need to be reconsidered or reinforced?
- In what ways can your school better prepare students to engage civically in an increasingly polarized environment?
- How can your school foster an environment where ideological diversity is viewed as an asset rather than a source of conflict?