

The Stories That Just Aren't True

In this SchoolCEO perspective, sociolinguist Dr. Julie Sweetland shares strategies for countering and reframing false narratives around public education. Sweetland is a senior advisor at the FrameWorks Institute, a nonprofit think tank dedicated to changing conversations around important social issues.

Discussion Guide



"Today's public education landscape is rife with a specific type of story: manufactured controversies. These acrimonious public debates over social ills seem to come from nowhere; most people aren't actually experiencing them, often because the phenomenon is either nonexistent or rare. ... More recently, manufactured controversies are escalating into full-blown moral panics."

- What manufactured controversies or moral panics have you encountered in your school community over the past year?



"Moral panics rely on the identification of a 'folk devil,' a scapegoat described as treacherous and out to get 'us.' Typically, the folk devil is associated with a social position possessing less power. Take, for example, the Salem witch trials. Women were portrayed as outsiders, then blamed for crimes or other social problems."

- What other "folk devils" have been the focus of moral panics in history?
- If your district is facing a moral panic, who is the "folk devil" at its center?



"Moral panics gain momentum when 'loud' voices call out a supposed threat and their claim begins to echo across society. When it's clear to you that the actual threat level is low or even nonexistent, you might be tempted to just wait for the noise to die down. But this can be a mistake..."

- What challenges have you faced when deciding whether to address or ignore controversial topics in your community?



"If we want to shift mindsets and conversations in a positive direction, we must learn to undercut the power of moral panic. Appeasement isn't the way to accomplish this task. Learning to respond strategically is the key."

- In what ways have you previously responded to false narratives about your school, and what was the outcome?



"For example, in responding to an inaccurate assertion that your school is 'indoctrinating students with critical race theory,' a common response might be: 'The truth is, we don't teach critical race theory...' While that statement is true, it's only relevant within the world created by the manufactured controversy."

- What reframing strategies could you use to shift the conversation away from manufactured controversies and toward your school's authentic mission?



"When possible, proactively preempt the spread of misinformation or hateful speech in public forums. Take, for example, school board meetings—which are often hotbeds for contentious discourse."

- How could you prepare your communication team and school board to prevent the spread of misinformation at public gatherings like board meetings?



"In a past research study, the FrameWorks Institute tested three ways of framing why community schools matter. ... What we found is that just calling out the need to change public education isn't enough. While showing examples of progress was more effective, the most effective framing was to tell stories about what public education could be. Aspirational stories give people a clear idea of what educational redesign could look like. They build collective efficacy and collective responsibility."

- What aspirational stories about your school community could serve as effective counternarratives to potential manufactured controversies?



"The fuel for moral panic is fear. The antidote to fear is clarity—and possibility."

- What practical steps will you take in the next month to provide both clarity and possibility in your school's communications?



For more information on The Stories That Just Aren't True:

<https://www.schoolceo.com/a/dr-julie-sweetland-the-stories-that-just-arent-true/>