

## Public Meetings Out Of Control? Think Like A Kindergarten Teacher

A CityTalk at League of California Cities Annual Conference  
Long Beach Thursday October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1:30-1:50 p.m.

**Larry Rosenthal, Program Director** [lar@berkeley.edu]  
Center on Civility & Democratic Engagement  
UC Berkeley



### Summary Points

- Incivility, disrespect, public “flaming” and even angry-mob takeovers are increasing problems in many local public hearings in California
- Not only do these behaviors damage the quality of public discourse, agendas are also sidetracked, and work may stand incomplete when adjournment finally arrives in the wee hours
- If public service grows more unappetizing in this respect, qualified candidates for office will be deterred from running altogether, due to public processes run amok
- Will these problems be just as bad in 100 years? If one imagines a better future, one must imagine what must change and a feasible path to improvement
- Consider the humble, hardworking kindergarten teacher ... what can we learn?
  - An attitude of caring and selflessness
  - A desire to truly know participants and their families
  - In modern practice, a variety to interventions (some gentle, some more stern) to maintain focus for the good of all
  - A sense of creativity, optimism, and stewardship
  - A foundation of rules and consequences, often considered as “last resort” techniques if interpersonal work does not succeed
- The juxtaposition of a city-council hearing room and a kindergarten classroom is a *heuristic* → it gets us thinking about comparisons and contrasts, and it forces us to reexamine the *core purposes of hearings* and whether their current design is optimal
- It also presses us to think around the edges of speech rights: what innovation might the First Amendment actually *allow*, and even *welcome*?