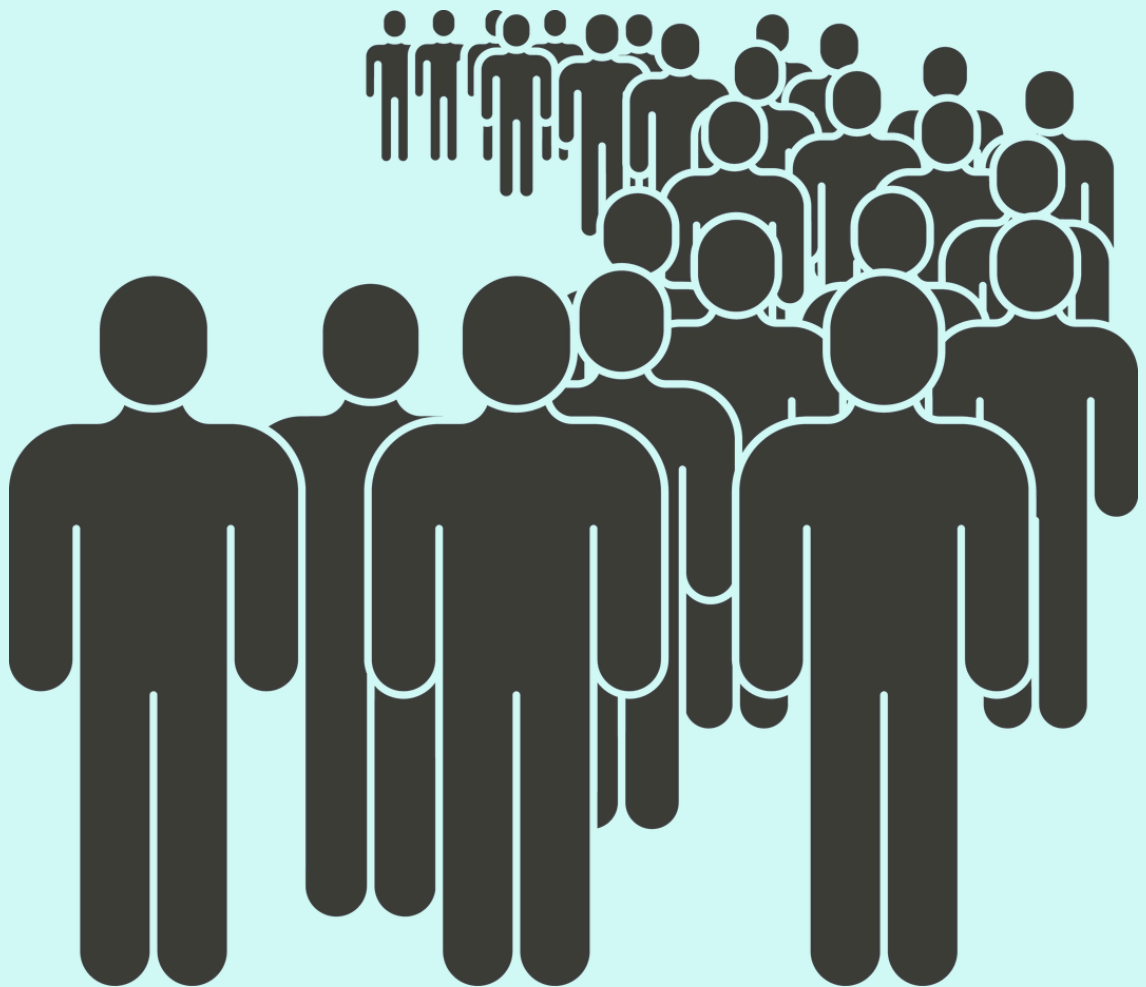




MARCH 12TH 2025

# THOUGHTMEET

on Populism and Education



## What happens to education when societies become more divided — and how can education systems respond?

This question framed a timely and reflective ARC ThoughtMeet, bringing together education leaders from across countries to explore the growing influence of populism on education, democracy and public trust. Set against a backdrop of increasing political tension globally, the conversation created space for careful, open dialogue about complex and sensitive issues.

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### Understanding a shifting landscape

The session opened with insights from Diane Ravitch, former US Assistant Secretary of Education who invited participants to consider how contemporary forms of populism are reshaping public discourse around education. Rather than focusing on technical policy changes alone, her contribution highlighted how narratives — about schools, communities and fairness — play a powerful role in shaping public perception and trust.

Across contexts, participants recognized similar patterns: increasing polarization, growing skepticism towards public institutions, and competing narratives about the purpose of education. Questions of inclusion, equity and the role of public education are becoming more visible — and at times more contested.

At the same time, there was a shared recognition that these developments cannot be understood in isolation. They are connected to broader societal dynamics, including economic inequality, shifting identities and changing relationships between citizens and institutions.



# Education at the centre of the conversation

A key theme throughout the session was the role of public education as a cornerstone of democratic societies. Discussions explored how education systems can both be affected by — and respond to — changing political and social conditions. Participants reflected on the importance of maintaining education as an inclusive space, open to all learners, while also navigating increasingly complex expectations and pressures. Questions were raised about how to support educators in addressing sensitive topics, and how to ensure that schools remain places where diverse perspectives can be explored with care and professionalism.

There was also discussion of how policy directions, funding structures and public narratives can influence perceptions of quality and equity in education — sometimes in ways that are not immediately visible.

## Responding with understanding and connection

Building on these reflections, ARC President Andy Hargreaves encouraged participants to look more closely at the underlying drivers behind populist movements. Rather than responding with dismissal or purely technical solutions, he emphasized the importance of understanding the experiences of those who feel unheard or left behind.

A recurring idea was the need to reconnect education with people's everyday realities — using language, narratives and approaches that resonate more widely. This includes recognizing the emotional dimensions of public debate, and the importance of trust, dignity and belonging in shaping people's views of education. Participants also reflected on the importance of addressing broader issues such as inequality and social cohesion alongside educational change, recognizing that schools are part of a wider societal fabric.

# A shared responsibility for the future

In group discussions, participants explored what actions can be taken within their own roles and systems. While contexts differ, several common directions emerged.

There was a strong emphasis on strengthening community connections — bringing together schools, families and local communities to build shared understanding and support. Promoting democratic values, fostering inclusive school cultures, and supporting educators in their professional roles were also highlighted as key priorities.

Equally important was the role of communication. Participants noted the value of clear, accessible language and the power of positive narratives in building trust and countering division.



Across the discussion, there was a sense that education systems have an important role to play — not only in responding to current challenges, but in helping to shape more inclusive, informed and connected societies.

Because at its core, this work is not only about navigating political change. It is about sustaining education as a public good — a space where young people can learn, participate and develop the knowledge, values and relationships that underpin democratic life.