

FOREST RIDGE

SCHOOL OF THE SACRED HEART

Forest Ridge Principles for Civil Discourse

There is a deep-down unity, but there is no forced uniformity. The spirit is one, but its manifestations are many ... no one is 'made to order' of this or that shape, but each gives what she can for the common good; the common good demanding for its own sake, as well as for hers, that she should remain - herself.

-Janet Erskine Stuart, RSCJ

At Forest Ridge School of the Sacred Heart, our community is guided by the *Goals and Criteria* of Sacred Heart education. Our goals shape how we engage in dialogue, fostering an environment where we cultivate, nurture, and celebrate a diversity of thought, rich and robust discussion, and the healthy expression of differing ideas. It is a place where we can disagree with one another's opinions and beliefs, but we always respect the personal dignity and worth of each person in front of us.

Civil discourse is a respectful conversation aimed at deepening understanding, building trust, and promoting learning. Forest Ridge encourages all members of our community to follow the guidelines for civil discourse.

Civil Discourse: Core Values

As in all aspects of school life, community members should adhere to our civil discourse core values when engaging in discussions on social and political topics:

- **Empathy:** We strive to understand the experiences and perspectives of others, approaching every conversation with a willingness to listen deeply and engage thoughtfully.
- **Honesty:** We represent ourselves and our views with integrity, ensuring that all information shared is accurate and truthful. Manipulating or misrepresenting facts to advance an agenda is contrary to our commitment to truth.
- **Kindness:** Given that political or social disagreements sometimes lead to hurt feelings or tension, it is essential to prioritize kindness in our interactions with one another.
- **Respect:** When engaged in conversations that contain differing viewpoints, all parties maintain and show respect for others. This includes actively listening, acknowledging differing perspectives, and refraining from personal attacks.
- **Responsibility:** Members of the Forest Ridge community are responsible and accountable for their words and actions. We are mindful of the impact our discourse has on others and take responsibility for fostering a positive and inclusive environment.

Guidelines for Civil Discourse

As members of the Forest Ridge community, we should:

- Respect everyone's right to hold individual ideas
- Approach social and political conversations with a willingness to listen to ideas that differ from our own
- Choose our words carefully, aiming to respect others, rather than diminish or harm
- Ground discussions in fact and reason

As members of the Forest Ridge community, we should avoid:

- Direct antagonism (insults, demeaning or discriminatory language, mockery)
- Hostility (*ad hominem* attacks, uncontrolled emotion, threats)
- Excessive persuasion (misrepresentation of facts, emotional manipulation, logical fallacies)

Guidelines for Faculty to Foster Civil Discourse

Because we believe that it is the role of teachers, advisors, and school leaders to encourage students to think deeply about complex topics, we foster civil discourse with and between students in these specific ways:

- **Set clear expectations:** Use the principles for civil discourse to establish ground rules for discussions. Emphasize respect, active listening, and the importance of considering diverse perspectives. Make clear that it is your intention to create a classroom community where civil discourse is the norm when discussing meaty topics.
- **Model respectful behavior:** Share and model the guidelines for civil discourse with students before a classroom discussion begins.
- **Set guardrails for the discussion:** Be explicit and specific about what is and is not being assessed in a particular class or on a particular assignment.
- **Ensure equitable participation:** Create opportunities for all students to contribute, including those who may be quieter in a large group setting. Use strategies like small group discussions or written reflections to ensure diverse voices are heard.
- **Focus on ideas, not individuals:** Guide discussions in a way that supports the critique of ideas rather than attacking individuals. Reinforce the notion that disagreement with an idea does not equate to a personal attack.
- **Redirect inappropriate behavior immediately:** Intervene, redirect and/or stop a conversation if a student(s) is violating Forest Ridge's core values and/or guidelines for civil discourse. Follow up as necessary.
- **Encourage clarification and reiteration:** When appropriate, prompt students to clarify their points, ask for elaboration, and restate others' ideas to ensure understanding. This can help prevent misunderstandings and build a deeper dialogue.
- **Take a pause:** Do not hesitate to pause a conversation if it is not going well between students. Take a pause, go for a walk, and come back to the topic at another time.
- **Understand your position of power:** Be mindful of the impact that commentary or political expression by teachers, advisors, and school leaders may have on students. Make clear and reiterate often that students should take their own reasoned positions when responding to discussion prompts and that students will not be penalized for disagreeing with what they perceive as the teacher's viewpoint.