



Position Statement on Civil Discourse

“The point of education is not to make you comfortable; it’s to make you think.”

University of Chicago President Emeritus
Hannah Holborn Gray

Each member of the Wildwood School community carries with them ideas, values, perspectives, and beliefs that are uniquely their own and that are, over time, changeable. Relatedly, all members of the community possess identifiers, some of which are fixed and some of which might also evolve over time. (Race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, age, ability/disability, etc.) In creating this Position Statement on Civil Discourse at Wildwood School, our goal is to provide guidance to individuals as they facilitate and engage in constructive, respectful dialogue with others about the first category, especially: ideas, values, perspectives, and beliefs.

The language of our Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Mission Statement calls on the school to create the conditions where all members of the school community can feel safe. For us, that means systems, structures, and policies that will avoid harm and, when harm is unintentionally if sometimes inevitably caused, allow for reflection, restoration, and repair. We must remind ourselves and our students that one’s intention is not always aligned with their impact on others.

The free expression of speech, a sacred trust between the people of the United States of America and their government, is separate from the tenets of this statement, which are specific to Wildwood School and its community. Although members of the community are encouraged to express themselves and disagree respectfully, we should do so carefully and keeping in mind the audience with whom we are engaged.

As members of the professional community, we believe that:

Wildwood School's Mission and DEIB Mission statements should always guide the school's programs, policies, and practices.

Our school's primary purpose is to educate students, introducing them to the skills and knowledge required for their responsible participation in a democratic society.

The focus of our work should be teaching students to use their minds well, cultivating opportunities for individual students to develop their opinions, while the professionals working with them refrain from advocating for their own.

Physical and emotional safety are necessary in order for learning to take place.

Safety is different from comfort. In age appropriate ways and in the context of maintaining the conditions where all members of the community can feel safe, it is beneficial to students to engage with ideas and perspectives that make them feel uncomfortable. Navigating feelings of discomfort in the face of ideas and perspectives that challenge them is central to students being prepared for college and life.

In the context of a school--especially an independent school serving students in kindergarten through upper school--the concept of "free speech" is defined more narrowly than in the public sphere, where speech is protected by the First Amendment of the US Constitution. In the context of the public sphere, even hate speech might be protected. That is not the case in a K-12 school like Wildwood, where hate speech is not allowed. The school's Bias Incident Response Protocol and other policies are in place to address those types of violations.

Difficult conversations can--and sometimes will--cause discomfort and even unintentional harm. We should hold that those whose impact might not align with their intention are deserving of care, compassion, and grace, too. Our collective responsibility is to support learning and repair, even if and when disagreement remains and if that learning and repair takes time. In keeping with existing school protocols, we should also expect and accept the possibility of non-closure.

As members of the **faculty and staff, we should always aspire to:**

Proactively communicate our intention that civil discourse should be the norm in all dialogues both inside and outside the classroom.

Consider our audience and anticipate-and be prepared for-the potential for disagreement and even discord.

Review with Department Team Leaders, Discipline and/or Division Coordinators, and other appropriate school leaders any material that might be cause for unnecessary confusion or consternation, carefully and fully reviewing any materials before sharing them with students.

Be judicious in using unsettled or contentiously debated current or past events-especially particularly polarizing events-in providing context or examples to help students understand concepts or historical events.

Recognize when a conversation is moving beyond our individual ability as a facilitator, transparently acknowledging with students our need to pause and consider how best to honor our students' desire to discuss a topic for which we might require guidance from others.

Refrain from advocating for our own positions, including political affiliations, in ways that might unduly influence impressionable students, focusing instead on guiding students in learning how to think and not what to think.

Communicate proactively and clearly the fact that student assessments will neither benefit from nor be negatively impacted by what students perceive to be alignment or disagreement with our own perspective on a topic.

As students, we should always aspire to:

Respect the right of others to express opinions, perspectives, and ideas, regardless of the degree to which they reflect our own.

Ask questions, listening to understand rather than listening to respond.

Disagree respectfully, being mindful that each of us has the right to our own thoughts, values, and beliefs, and always seek to maintain our own and others' physical and emotional safety.

Recognize that our exposure to an idea that makes us uncomfortable is part of our learning and that being uncomfortable is not the same thing as being unsafe.

This position statement was informed by, among other resources, the EE Ford Foundation's [Thriving in a World of Pluralistic Contention: A Framework for Schools](#) and the school's existing social media policy.