

FAQ

Standards for Viewpoint-Neutral Education in Support of Student-Centered Open Inquiry

Frequently Asked Questions

This is a living document intended to provide ongoing guidance on viewpoint-neutral education in areas where context matters, boundaries are not always sharp, and both educators and administrators may confront difficult judgments or good-faith disagreement. As we continue to apply the Standards, new questions, examples, and gray areas will arise. Those questions cannot always be resolved in advance by mechanical rule; they must be worked through together in a spirit of shared professional responsibility, conversation, and reflection.

The goal is not perfect uniformity in every close case, but a shared culture in which educators and administrators remain attentive to preserving student-centered open inquiry and to avoiding the use of adult authority to steer students toward particular conclusions on contested issues. Ultimately, the aim is to educate students who are exceptionally well prepared to think for themselves, engage seriously with competing ideas, and discuss society’s most challenging questions with rigor, independence, and respect.

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Applying the Standards

Can you give examples of “our values,” settled historical judgments, contested issues?

These categories help educators distinguish among matters that may be taught and modeled as part of the Schools’ communal life, matters that may appropriately be taught as settled for instructional purposes, and matters that call for heightened attention to viewpoint neutrality. As explained in the Interpretive Principles, the question is not whether disagreement exists, but whether there is serious, ongoing disagreement among informed participants in contemporary public debate and, where relevant, scholarship. The boundaries are not always sharp, and context matters. Some matters may be settled at one level and contested at another; for example, an empirical claim may be well supported while appropriate policy responses remain contested. The examples below are illustrative, not exhaustive.

Communal and classroom values. These are values the Schools may and should teach, model, and foster because they are foundational to a pluralistic learning community. Examples include:

- Treating others with dignity and respect
- Honesty and academic integrity
- Listening and reasoned disagreement
- Being a welcoming and inclusive community
- Basic classroom norms that make inquiry possible (e.g., turn-taking, sharing, civility, and appropriate language for the setting)

Widely settled historical judgments. These are historical and normative conclusions that can appropriately be taught as settled for instructional purposes because they reflect deep convergence across scholarship, law, and democratic practice—while still leaving room for inquiry into evidence, interpretation, and historical context. Examples include:

- Slavery and racial caste systems as profound injustices and violations of human dignity
- The Holocaust as a historical fact and an instance of dehumanizing tyranny
- Disenfranchisement based on race or sex as undemocratic violations of equal citizenship

Contested issues. These are active areas of disagreement in contemporary public debate where heightened attention to viewpoint neutrality is particularly important. Examples include:

- Immigration policy and enforcement methods
- Abortion and reproductive rights
- Gun regulation
- Affirmative action
- Climate policy and tradeoffs
- Policing, criminal punishment, and public safety tradeoffs
- Geopolitical conflicts and foreign policy disputes
- The role of religion in public life and public institutions
- Economic policy disputes (taxation, redistribution, industrial policy, regulation)

How do we foster belonging, diversity, and inclusion under these Standards?

Nothing in these Standards requires educators to be neutral about the Schools' core communal and classroom values. Classrooms should be welcoming for all students; dignity and non-harassment norms should be enforced; and students with differing backgrounds, viewpoints, and experiences should feel equally respected, included, and able to participate freely.

Importantly, inclusion must be durable across disagreement. Because contested issues divide reasonable people, the Schools foster belonging by strengthening shared values and building rich, representative learning experiences—rather than by using adult authority to endorse contested conclusions or by making agreement the price of membership. In practice, this includes:

- drawing from a wide range of sources, histories, authors, experiences, characters, families, ways of life, and perspectives;
- maintaining clear classroom norms of dignity, non-harassment, and respectful disagreement, including protections against ostracism or pressure to conform;
- providing student-centered support by responding to harm or dehumanization when it arises and reinforcing our values in developmentally appropriate ways; and
- designing discussion, assignments, and projects so students can engage respectfully across disagreement without being pressured to adopt particular contested positions.

How do these Standards support viewpoint diversity in curriculum and instruction?

Student-centered open inquiry requires more than simply stating learning goals. When contested issues are engaged in curriculum or instruction, educators should build in opportunities for students to encounter, compare, and evaluate competing ideas and arguments. Such design choices promote independent thinking and help ensure that viewpoint diversity is reflected in how students engage with ideas, not only in the content they are asked to study.

In practice, this often includes:

- **Competing perspectives and schools of thought:** presenting more than one serious interpretation, argument, or framework where reasoned disagreement exists, at a level appropriate to students' developmental readiness.
- **Perspective-shifting as a skill:** asking students to summarize an opposing view fairly, identify its strongest arguments, and compare how different lenses change what evidence and tradeoffs appear most important.
- **Argument and counterargument:** building in opportunities for students to test claims, raise objections, offer concessions, and revise views in light of evidence and reasoning.
- **Evaluation without alignment:** grading and feedback should reward reasoning, evidence, clarity, and responsiveness to counterarguments—not agreement with any preferred conclusion.

This is not a requirement of both-sidesism or of presenting weakly and strongly evidenced claims as co-equal. It is a commitment to giving students real opportunities to engage serious, scholarly disagreement through disciplined inquiry.

When we disagree, who ultimately decides—and how?

These Standards are meant to function like other professional standards: educators exercise judgment supported by colleagues and administrators, and administrators use ordinary professional processes to provide feedback, coaching, clarification, and accountability. At the same time, when disagreements persist on important matters, the Schools must be able to draw lines that protect student-centered open inquiry.

In day-to-day practice, educators necessarily make real-time decisions, and many of those decisions cannot wait. Educators should make reasonable in-the-moment judgments consistent with the Standards and the Schools' commitment to student-centered open inquiry. When a situation raises uncertainty—because a topic is sensitive, a student raises a concern, or the framing could reasonably be perceived as endorsement—the right posture is to note it and, when appropriate, reflect later with colleagues and administrators.

When concerns arise, the first response is ordinarily conversation, coaching, and guidance, just as with other aspects of professional practice. The goal is to build a culture of shared judgment and partnership. In evaluating approaches to potentially contested issues, educators and administrators should use a shared analytic framework rather than relying on individual judgment alone:

- *What:* Does this implicate a contested issue, or could it reasonably be understood that way?
- *Why:* If so, is there a pedagogical reason for it to be present as instructional content?
- *How:* If present, is it framed as inquiry rather than endorsement, and appropriate to students' developmental readiness?

Not every close question requires identical practice across classrooms. In a healthy culture of viewpoint neutrality, there will be edge cases where reasonable educators make different calls, especially in fast-moving classroom discussion. But variation is not a substitute for judgment. When a practice predictably functions as endorsement rather than inquiry—or begins to shape the shared environment in a way that undermines open inquiry—the Schools should correct course.

Educators necessarily exercise professional judgment in the moment. When significant disagreements persist about how these Standards apply, administrators are responsible for making and communicating a final determination grounded in the Standards, after careful consideration of educators' perspectives and concerns.

How do these Standards relate to norms of academic freedom, free expression, and institutional neutrality at the University?

The Laboratory Schools and the University share a fundamental commitment to open inquiry but operate in distinct educational settings that call for somewhat different implementations of shared principles. University faculty often work in roles that include scholarship, research, and instruction in higher education, with norms of academic freedom shaped in part by those functions. Lab educators work in a setting in which students are minors, authority effects are stronger, and the professional role is pedagogical across a broad range of student-facing contexts.

Across these settings, there is a shared foundation. At the University, norms of institutional neutrality help ensure that members of the community can explore important questions freely and seriously without being steered toward or away from particular conclusions by the authority of the institution or its leadership. Norms of academic freedom in the university classroom coexist with the professor's pedagogical role and are consistent with the expectation that instruction remains connected to the learning goals and subject matter of the course rather than serving as a vehicle for steering students toward the professor's personal political, ideological, religious, or normative commitments. At Lab, viewpoint-neutral education serves an analogous function: it helps ensure that classrooms and school spaces remain student-centered environments of open inquiry, where students can explore important questions freely and seriously without being steered toward or away from particular conclusions on contested issues by the authority of educators or administrators. For that reason, the Standards for viewpoint-neutral education reflect the University's fundamental commitments to academic freedom, free expression, and institutional neutrality in a way that is appropriately tailored to the Lab setting.

Classroom environment and course materials

When does personal expression—such as personal adornment, a mug or laptop sticker, or a wall display—become classroom messaging?

Under the Standards, the central question is whether personal expression in a student-facing professional context is reasonably understood, in context, as incidental personal expression or as adult or institutional messaging in the school environment. Two distinctions do most of the work here:

- **Attribution (who is speaking):** A personal item typically reads differently from a wall or door display. A mug on a desk is more plausibly understood as an educator's personal item. A sign on the wall is more likely to be experienced as the classroom or school declaring what "we believe."
- **Pervasiveness and persistence (how unavoidable it is):** A personal adornment or mug is usually less pervasive than a display that every student encounters. The more prominent, repeated, and unavoidable the message is in the student-facing environment, the greater the risk that it will function as an authoritative signal rather than incidental personal expression.

These distinctions explain why the Standards treat the examples differently. A necklace, pin, mug, water bottle, or laptop sticker can often be incidental personal expression, especially when it is part of an educator's ordinary personal presentation, not directed at students as a message, not pervasive in the space, and not reasonably understood as the classroom or school speaking. When an item is closely tied to a contested issue or has become newly politicized, the same item can function differently, and educators should be sensitive to this. A useful check is whether the expression is part of a stable pattern of personal presentation or was recently adopted in response to a current event in a way that is likely to function as messaging. Coordinated efforts among multiple individuals may also indicate that symbolic expression is functioning as more than merely personal expression.

Can I include syllabus statements about climate, diversity, land acknowledgments, or other personal or departmental commitments?

Ordinarily not—when the statement functions as an instructor’s or department’s affirmation of belief or commitment on a contested issue rather than as course-relevant instructional or procedural information. A syllabus is an authoritative course document: it sets expectations for how the course works and what students need to participate and succeed. In that setting, statements can function as messaging in two ways: **explicitly**, by declaring a position on a contested issue (“we/I believe...”), and **implicitly**, by selectively foregrounding a politically salient issue or statement in a way that is not directly necessary to the course. By contrast, course requirements, norms for participation, accommodations, and other information directly relevant to students’ participation and success belong on a syllabus.

Classroom discussion and inquiry

Is it ever appropriate to share my views on contested issues with students?

The Standards do not impose a blanket rule that educators may never disclose their own thinking to students. But the general expectation should be that educators keep their personal views on contested issues to themselves. In limited circumstances, however, thoughtful disclosure of an educator’s own thinking may support student learning rather than displace it.

That depends on purpose and context. At times, an educator may share how they reason from evidence and values in order to make intellectual inquiry more concrete and transparent, especially when doing so invites disagreement rather than discourages it. When possible, an educator may also wish to explain how a person with a different point of view might reason from evidence and values, so that students can see more than one serious way of approaching the question. By contrast, if the purpose of sharing one’s view is primarily to express the educator’s own position on a contested issue, that is inappropriate in a school setting.

Developmental readiness matters, as does the distinction between a one-on-one conversation and a classroom setting. An educator’s personal view can land very differently depending on whether it appears in a genuinely dialogic exchange, where students can question and push back, or in a setting that feels authoritative by design.

Above all, educators should be wary of presenting their personal view as *the answer* or as the conclusion students are expected to reach.

When a student or educator finds a term offensive, can and should I prohibit it or require different vocabulary in discussion?

Two values matter here: dignity, non-harassment, and inclusion, on the one hand, and open inquiry into contested ideas, on the other. A practical way to approach language disputes is to distinguish three categories.

Language that violates our values. Some language is out of bounds because its function is to demean, dehumanize, harass, or target people. That includes slurs, dehumanizing tropes, and language

used to insult, degrade, or intimidate individuals or groups. In such cases, educators should intervene. This is not a both-sides question; it is enforcement of the baseline norms that make pluralistic learning possible.

Respectful reference. Classrooms may enforce legitimate norms about how students and adults refer to one another. Another person’s dignity and standing in the classroom community is not an object of debate. Persistent refusal to refer to **others respectfully** is inconsistent with those norms.

Contested or framework-laden terminology. Other disputes are not primarily about harassment, but about competing vocabularies that reflect deeper conceptual disagreements. In such cases, requiring a single authorized terminology can amount to taking sides in an underlying contested question. Educators should insist on respectful tone and good-faith engagement, while treating the disagreement itself as an object of inquiry.

Examples include: “biological sex” / “sex assigned at birth”; “illegal immigrant” / “undocumented immigrant”; “merit” / “structural advantage”; “school choice” / “privatization”; “climate change” / “climate crisis”; “riot” / “uprising”; “fetus” / “unborn child”; “terrorism” / “armed resistance.”

In such cases, the educational task is to clarify what different terms mean, what assumptions they carry, what arguments they support, and how word choice shapes interpretation and judgment, while maintaining respectful discussion.

This is also an area where the no-heckler’s-veto principle matters. If the rule becomes that any term that someone finds offensive is prohibited, then contested questions are effectively resolved by objection rather than by inquiry. The Standards’ approach is to protect baseline norms of dignity and respectful participation while keeping contested analytic frameworks open to examination.

Do I need to avoid teaching social frameworks associated with a point of view, like structural racism, meritocracy, critical theory, or neoliberalism?

No. Educators need not avoid teaching frameworks associated with particular points of view, including structural racism, meritocracy, anti-racism, colorblindness, critical theory, neoliberalism, American exceptionalism, market fundamentalism, or class conflict. But such frameworks should be presented as interpretive lenses open to analysis, evidence, critique, and comparison. The instructional problem is not that a framework carries moral or political assumptions and implications. The problem arises when a framework that bundles descriptive, causal, and normative claims is presented as objective, settled, or beyond examination, so that students experience it not as something to study, but as something they are expected to adopt.

A common instructional risk involves **default explanation**. A class might treat structural discrimination or structural disadvantage as the default explanation for outcomes, or instead treat meritocracy and personal responsibility as the default explanation. Either approach can flatten inquiry if presented as the unquestionable baseline rather than as one contestable way of understanding a problem.

A second risk arises when a framework is taught as a **normative-causal package** rather than as an object of study. Anti-racism, colorblindness, critical theory, neoliberalism, and many other frameworks often

combine empirical claims, causal stories, moral judgments, and policy implications. All may be taught seriously. But they should not be taught as if students are expected to accept the whole package rather than examine its claims, criticisms, and alternatives.

A third risk arises when a framework becomes the course’s **authoritative civic or moral lens**. Oppressor/oppressed analysis, American exceptionalism, market fundamentalism, and class-conflict or materialist explanation can all be intellectually serious frameworks. The instructional problem arises when any such framework is presented as the only morally or intellectually legitimate standpoint from which students are expected to interpret social or political life.

Of course, many disciplines have central analytic frameworks that it is appropriate to teach as part of the field. The concern here is not with teaching frameworks seriously, but with treating them as beyond examination or as requiring students to adopt particular normative conclusions.

It is also important, especially in non-specialized classes, not to turn framework vocabulary into a participation requirement. Disputes over terminology can become a way of settling the underlying disagreement by authority. In inquiry settings, it is usually better to require respectful tone and then make the language itself an object of analysis, rather than mandating one vocabulary as the price of being respectful or included.

Is teaching the history or literature of marginalized or subordinated groups considered disallowed activism?

No. Teaching the history or literature of marginalized or subordinated groups is part of a serious education. More broadly, teaching about the history, literature, or culture of any group is not, in and of itself, activism. To the contrary, exposing students, in a scholarly and objective manner, to a wide range of histories, cultures, and perspectives is an essential part of open inquiry.

Can I teach climate science as settled science if a parent says it’s contested?

Yes. Politicization and parental disagreement do not, by themselves, turn a claim that is well supported by scientific evidence and analysis into a contested issue in the sense relevant to instruction. The obligation under the Standards is scholarly and objective teaching: clear sourcing, attention to uncertainty where it exists, rigorous explanation of evidence and argument, and disciplined separation of facts and values. If the scientific evidence is strongly convergent, an objection does not make the issue contested.

That said, it is important to avoid moving—explicitly or implicitly—from teaching the science as settled to treating any policy response as settled. Disagreements about policy tools, tradeoffs, and ethical judgments regarding responsibility remain ongoing even among those who do not doubt the empirical evidence that human activity is a driver of climate change. Students should understand that what we should do does not always follow from the science alone.

Service projects, civic engagement, and student action

How can I teach citizenship and taking action without pushing students toward one side?

Civic education is compatible with viewpoint neutrality. The goal is to teach students how to participate in civic life—how to deliberate with people who disagree, evaluate evidence and sources, distinguish facts from values, understand institutions, communicate to different audiences, weigh tradeoffs, act effectively—without using adult authority to steer them toward a particular conclusion on a contested issue. In the right course and at the right developmental level, this can include learning how public advocacy works (e.g., writing to public officials, organizing, analyzing campaigns), so long as the instructional aim is skill-building and inquiry rather than alignment with a particular position.

The key is that the assignments and instruction should not predetermine the conclusion. Projects should be designed so students can reach different conclusions—for example, by choosing their own position or by being assigned different roles for practice—and evaluation should reward reasoning, evidence, clarity, and efficacy, not agreement. A concern about viewpoint neutrality arises when an activity requires students to adopt, affirm, or publicly perform a single “correct” stance on a contested issue; that closes inquiry rather than opening it.

Can I publicly display student-created work that takes a position on a contested issue?

Often, yes. The key question is how the work will function when displayed publicly. Public display in hallways, common areas, or other widely visible spaces is different from work kept within the classroom where the inquiry occurred. If viewers encounter student work without the context, discussion, and framing that existed during instruction, the display may function as an endorsed message in the shared school environment, even if the instructional process that produced the work was thoughtful and consistent with open inquiry. For that reason, when displaying student work on contested issues outside the classroom, educators should consider whether additional context is needed to make the educational purpose clear and avoid presenting the work as a settled message. Depending on age and setting, that might include brief framing text explaining that the work emerged from an inquiry-based unit, reflective statements from students about their reasoning process, or analytic artifacts alongside the final products.

Can students engage in activism through clubs or student groups, and what is the adult’s role?

Yes. Student-led advocacy in clubs and extracurriculars is entirely consistent with the Standards. The key is that the activity is genuinely student-directed rather than adult-directed, and that adult advisors do not use their authority to steer students toward or away from a particular position on a contested issue.

Can my class do a service project without it becoming political advocacy?

Yes. Service projects are an important way we make concrete our values of care and community membership. Projects like food drives, school-based clothing collections, or classroom stewardship are straightforward when framed as helping others rather than as support for or opposition to a contested policy position. Projects focused on particular groups or humanitarian needs (e.g., refugees or disaster

relief) are appropriate when framed as humanitarian support rather than as lessons in what students should believe about contested public debates.

Care is needed when partnering with outside organizations. Many organizations do good work while also holding views about contested issues. The Standards do not require the Schools to partner only with organizations that have no worldview. The question is whether the activity is limited to the relevant service function or whether students are being drawn into advocacy or messaging. A useful check is whether the service activity is genuinely separable from the organization's platform: Would it still be appropriate if the group had no policy agenda? Could a non-advocacy organization reasonably do the same activity? If the answer to either is no, the partnership risks shifting from service into endorsement of a contested position.

Finally, educators should be attentive to whether particular objects, practices, or messages have come to function as recognizable symbols in an ongoing political debate. Incorporating them into student activities can shift a service project from humanitarian support into endorsement of a contested position.

Current events and dignity norms

When a current event or public conduct violates our basic dignity norms, can I name it?

Yes. The Schools stand for our communal and classroom values, and when students are confronting conduct that clearly violates those values, it is consistent with the Standards to name the breach clearly.

As always, context and purpose matter. When the issue arises organically—students bring it up or are unsettled—educators may respond in real time by reaffirming our values and providing the context students need. Especially with younger students, the immediate aim is often to restore a workable learning environment so students can participate safely. With older students, educators might also introduce current events proactively when doing so serves clear learning goals (e.g., analyzing rhetoric, media literacy, democratic norms, or institutional responses). What should be avoided is raising current events primarily to express adult approval or disapproval rather than to advance a clear instructional purpose.