

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

# Executive Summary

These Standards support student-centered open inquiry. Their aspiration is to help students, over the course of their education, grow into independent thinkers capable of thoughtfully engaging important questions. Their approach is viewpoint-neutral education: ensuring that students can do so without adult authority steering them toward or away from particular conclusions on contested issues.

**Definitions.** A few key terms require definition.

- **Student-centered open inquiry** is an instructional approach that places students' intellectual agency, curiosity, and autonomy at the center of learning, cultivating independent judgment.
- **Viewpoint-neutral education** is a commitment to ensuring that classrooms and school spaces do not privilege, presume, or promote a correct position on contested issues.
- **Contested issues** are topics about which reasonable, informed people disagree in contemporary public debate.
- **Communal and classroom values** are baseline expectations that govern conduct in a pluralistic school community and sustain an environment of learning and open inquiry.
- **Widely settled historical judgments** are conclusions that can appropriately be taught as settled because they reflect deep convergence across scholarship, law, and democratic practice.

**Standards.** The six Standards below elaborate this approach.

1. **Pedagogical Justification.** Educators should engage contested issues in instructional settings only when pedagogically justified—that is, when relevant to the subject matter and learning goals, or when arising organically from students.
2. **Developmental Appropriateness.** Engagement with contested issues should align with students' developmental readiness. Educators should calibrate what is introduced and how it is engaged to students' capacity to understand evidence, weigh arguments, and distinguish facts from values.
3. **Values, Settled Judgments, and Contested Issues.** Teaching and modeling communal and classroom norms is a core educational and professional responsibility and is distinct from advocating positions on contested issues. Teaching widely settled historical judgments, where appropriate, is likewise distinct from advocating positions on contested issues.
4. **Students' Intellectual Freedom and Classroom Climate.** Instruction and school environments should not privilege, presume, or promote a correct viewpoint on contested issues. Educators should cultivate classroom environments in which disagreement is treated as a normal and productive feature of intellectual life, and in which students with differing viewpoints feel equally respected, included, and able to participate freely.
5. **Scholarly and Objective Presentation.** Educators should present contested issues in a scholarly and objective manner that preserves students' freedom to evaluate competing perspectives, ask questions, and challenge ideas.
6. **Non-Dialogic Expression in the School Environment.** Educators' choices shape the learning environment not only through instruction but also through channels of adult authority that do not involve live dialogue with students, including physical displays and signage, recurring templates, course documents and communications, and personal expression in student-facing professional contexts. Care should be taken in the prominence, pervasiveness, tone, and use of these forms of expression to avoid the impression that they reflect adult endorsement of a particular position on a contested issue in a school setting.

These Standards affirm teaching and modeling communal and classroom values, support teaching widely settled historical judgments, and encourage educators to engage contested issues through open inquiry. Their aim is not to narrow the range of questions students encounter, but to ensure that those questions are engaged in ways that preserve students' intellectual freedom.

## Introduction

The purpose of this document is to provide standards for viewpoint-neutral education in support of student-centered open inquiry. At its best, student-centered open inquiry is not only rigorous but joyful: it begins in curiosity and wonder, grows into serious questioning and reflection, and invites students, over the course of their education, to become deep, independent thinkers who can learn from and engage thoughtfully with those with whom they disagree.

These Standards are meant to support a shared professional culture in which the development of students' intellectual agency is central. Their purpose is not to avoid difficult questions or discourage engagement with contested issues. To the contrary, the goal is to ensure that students can encounter, explore, and evaluate important questions through open inquiry, without adult authority steering them toward or away from particular conclusions.

Applying these Standards requires professional judgment, attention to context, and ongoing partnership between educators and administrators. Because instructional settings, subject matter, and developmental stages differ, not every case will admit of a bright-line answer. What open inquiry looks like will appropriately vary across the Schools, from the exploratory spirit of younger learners to the more explicit argument, analysis, and civil disagreement of older students. When this culture is cultivated well, it makes the Schools a place where inquiry can be both serious and alive—where students feel free to ask real questions, test ideas, and grow in confidence as thinkers. The expectation is not perfect uniformity of practice, but shared alignment on core principles: preserving students' freedom to think independently, cultivating reasoned inquiry and disagreement, and sustaining a school community that is open and welcoming to all. Accordingly, our guiding question should be not only what is permitted, but how what we say and do serves students' learning and preserves their freedom to think for themselves.

These Standards apply to all Laboratory Schools employees and to all instructional activities and student-facing environments shaped by their professional decisions. They govern employee conduct in professional contexts, not employees' private speech in their personal capacity off campus. A separate FAQ addresses recurring questions that have arisen in discussions of viewpoint-neutral education and student-centered open inquiry. That FAQ is intended to remain a living document reflecting ongoing experience and continued conversation about these issues.

## Core Concepts and Interpretive Principles

The Standards that follow depend on several core distinctions. This section defines those concepts and identifies interpretive principles for applying them.

### Definitions

***Student-centered open inquiry*** is an instructional approach that places students' intellectual agency, curiosity, and autonomy at the center of learning, cultivating independent judgment.

**Viewpoint-neutral education** is the commitment to ensuring that classrooms and school spaces do not privilege, presume, or promote a correct political, ideological, religious, or normative position on contested issues.

**Contested issues** are topics about which reasonable, informed people disagree in contemporary public debate. Contestation might concern unsettled questions of fact or disagreements regarding political, ideological, religious, or moral values.

**Communal and classroom values (sometimes shortened to “our values”)** are baseline expectations that govern conduct in a pluralistic school community and sustain an environment of learning and open inquiry. They include, among other things, commitments to the dignity of all people, care for others, belonging and inclusion, honesty, non-harassment, listening, and respectful disagreement.

**Widely settled historical judgments** 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 and are consistent with our communal and classroom values. Widely settled should be treated as a narrow category and used sparingly.

## Interpretive Principles

**Identifying contested issues.** In determining whether an issue is contested, educators and administrators should consider whether it is the subject of ongoing disagreement among informed participants in contemporary public debate and, where relevant, scholarship, including whether the issue is primarily empirical or also centrally normative; whether there is strong scholarly or societal convergence or instead reasoned disagreement; and whether it is newly emerging, rapidly developing, or newly politicized. These considerations are guideposts, not a mechanical test, and close cases require professional judgment, attention to context, and consultation where appropriate.

**Reasonableness.** In these Standards, *reasonable* refers to good-faith judgments made in context. In evaluating adult expression and school environments, the relevant question is whether a statement, symbol, or display could reasonably be understood—given the authority effects of the school setting—by a good-faith member of the school community as adult or institutional endorsement of one side of a contested issue.

**No heckler’s veto.** These Standards do not create a heckler’s veto. The fact that an individual objects to an instructional choice or expression is not, by itself, dispositive. The relevant question is whether, applying the reasonableness framework and attending to context, the practice would function as adult or institutional endorsement of one side of a contested issue or otherwise undermine student-centered open inquiry.

**Neutrality and our values.** Viewpoint-neutral education is compatible with clarity about communal and classroom values. Educators may and should teach and enforce those values, and may teach widely settled historical judgments as settled for instructional purposes.

**Neutrality and inquiry.** The purpose of viewpoint-neutral education is not to limit inquiry or discourage engagement with difficult, important, or contested topics. Rather, the goal is to ensure that Lab

classrooms and school spaces remain student-centered environments of open inquiry—places where students can encounter, explore, and evaluate important questions without being steered toward or away from particular conclusions by the authority of adults.

## Standards for Viewpoint-Neutral Education

The following Standards govern how contested issues are engaged in school environments. They are unified by a single overarching principle: educators do not use their adult authority to steer students toward or away from particular conclusions on contested issues, explicitly or implicitly. Instead, they seek to foster student-centered open inquiry.

**Standard 1: Pedagogical Justification.** Educators should engage contested issues in instructional settings only when pedagogically justified—that is, when the engagement is relevant to the subject matter and learning goals of the course, or when it arises organically from students in a manner appropriate to the instructional context. When an educator introduces a contested issue proactively, the engagement should fall within the educator’s area of professional competence, appropriate course content, and normal instructional procedures. When students raise contested issues—whether in connection with a lesson, a current event, or personal curiosity—educators may respond in ways that are developmentally appropriate, attentive to students’ emotional context, and consistent with our values.

**Standard 2: Developmental Appropriateness.** Engagement with contested issues should align with students’ developmental readiness. Educators should calibrate what is introduced and how it is engaged to students’ capacity to understand evidence, weigh competing arguments, and distinguish facts from values. With younger learners—where concrete examples are essential—educators should take care not to make contested issues concrete in ways that presuppose a particular conclusion. As students mature and develop greater capacity for abstraction and critical reasoning, instruction may include more explicit examination of competing perspectives, arguments, and tradeoffs, but should remain attentive to authority effects and preserve students’ freedom to reason independently rather than treating particular conclusions as the expected or settled outcome.

**Standard 3: Values, Settled Judgments, and Contested Issues.** Teaching and modeling communal and classroom norms is a core educational and professional responsibility and is distinct from advocating positions on contested issues. Teaching widely settled historical judgments, where appropriate, is likewise distinct from advocating positions on contested issues. Where the line blurs (e.g., through language, symbols, or frameworks that have both universalistic and contested political meanings), educators should favor approaches that reinforce our values without signaling endorsement of or opposition to a particular position on a contested issue.

**Standard 4: Students’ Intellectual Freedom and Classroom Climate.** Instruction and school environments should not privilege, presume, or promote a correct viewpoint on contested issues. Educators should avoid practices that pressure students toward or away from particular conclusions or otherwise undermine independent reasoning about contested issues. They should cultivate classroom environments in which disagreement is treated as a normal and productive feature of intellectual life, and in which students with differing viewpoints feel equally respected, included, and able to participate freely. Discussion of contested issues should be facilitated in ways that encourage reasoned engagement with

competing arguments and discourage proselytizing, ostracism, or social pressure to conform. In a pluralistic school community, inclusion must be durable across disagreement; students should not experience belonging or respect as contingent on adopting particular positions on contested issues.

**Standard 5: Scholarly and Objective Presentation.** Educators should present contested issues in a scholarly and objective manner that preserves students’ freedom to evaluate competing perspectives, ask questions, and challenge ideas. This requires careful sourcing and verification; fair and accurate presentation of evidence, uncertainty, and competing arguments; respectful engagement that does not personalize disagreement; attention to the distinction between facts and values; and intellectual humility, including an acknowledgment that even strongly held views can be mistaken. When planning instruction that engages contested issues, educators should ensure that students will encounter and grapple with more than one relevant perspective. This standard does not require treating all claims as equally well supported. Educators should use disciplinary standards of evidence and reasoning to distinguish stronger from weaker arguments, while ensuring that students encounter the range of serious, relevant perspectives appropriate to the course and to students’ developmental readiness.

**Standard 6: Non-Dialogic Expression in the School Environment.** Educators’ choices shape the learning environment not only through instruction but also through channels of adult authority that do not involve live dialogue with students, including physical displays and signage, recurring templates, course documents and communications, and personal expression in student-facing professional contexts. Care should be taken with the prominence, pervasiveness, tone, and use of these forms of expression to avoid the impression that they reflect adult endorsement of a particular position on a contested issue in a school setting. This standard does not require educators to refrain from ordinary forms of personal presentation that are not reasonably understood, in context, as signaling endorsement of a position on a contested issue. Nor does it preclude the use of materials related to contested issues when pedagogically justified and clearly framed as objects of inquiry and analysis rather than endorsement.<sup>1</sup>

## Shared Professional Responsibility and Administrative Partnership

Successful implementation of these Standards depends on shared norms, professional judgment, and constructive partnership between educators and administrators.

### Partnership and Responsibilities

Educators will:

- establish classroom norms that respect viewpoint diversity and sustain a learning environment conducive to open inquiry;

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<sup>1</sup>Nothing in this document is intended to interfere with, restrain, or coerce Lab School personnel in the exercise of rights guaranteed under Section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act, including the right to self-organization, to form, join, or assist labor organizations, to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and to engage in other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection (including to address work-related issues like working conditions), as well as the right to refrain from any or all such activities.

- apply these Standards in good faith and consistent with their purposes;
- exercise professional judgment and reflect on practice in support of continuous improvement;
- share unit-level plans with divisional leadership to support consultation and constructive dialogue about how instructional choices serve learning goals and student-centered open inquiry; and
- consult and partner with colleagues and administrators when uncertainty arises.

Administrators will:

- provide guidance and collaborative problem-solving;
- support professional development and shared learning;
- offer clarity where interpretation is difficult; and
- ensure consistent professional feedback when practices depart from these Standards.

## **Alignment with Faculty Expectations Framework**

These Standards align with the Laboratory Schools’ Faculty Expectations framework and are intended to support and clarify professional practice. Viewpoint-neutral, student-centered open inquiry is not a discrete or add-on expectation. It is a dimension of effective professional practice reflected across multiple domains of the Faculty Expectations framework, including planning and preparation, learning environments, instructional practice, principled teaching, and professional responsibilities.

## **Instructional Planning and Shared Visibility**

Sharing instructional plans is a normal part of how schools sustain partnership between educators and administrators. The same principle applies here. To facilitate consultation and constructive dialogue, educators will be expected to share unit-level plans with divisional leadership in a manner appropriate to their instructional context. The purpose of this shared planning is to ensure that administrators have visibility into instructional goals, materials, and framing, and can engage with educators about how their approach to contested issues serves student learning and student-centered open inquiry. Because instructional models differ across divisions, the specific form of unit-level planning will vary and will be communicated by divisional leaders. This shared planning is intended to support guidance and dialogue, not prior approval of instruction, and it does not displace educators’ real-time classroom judgment.

## **Implementation, Guidance, and Professional Process**

Implementation of these Standards will emphasize guidance, professional learning, consultation, and collaborative problem-solving. When questions or concerns arise, either educators or administrators may initiate consultation. Concerns about practice will ordinarily be addressed through conversation, coaching, and reflection in the first instance, with attention to context, intent, and opportunity for growth. Patterns of repeated or flagrant departure from these Standards—especially after guidance and consultation—may require follow-up through existing professional processes.