

Community Relations

Promoting Civil Discourse

Rationale

The Board of Education (Board) recognizes the need to promote civility in our country. Civility is also a key element of a positive school climate and culture. Civility policies are enacted to ensure there is an appropriate discourse between individuals; to keep the focus on the fact that we are here to educate children and to model appropriate behavior for them. Civil discourse is a crucial component of civility.

Maintaining an environment supportive of learning and free of disruptive conduct is important to the success of our children's education. The Board desires to enhance student learning by providing an orderly, caring, and nurturing educational and social environment in which all students can feel safe and take pride in their school and their achievements. A safe, civil environment is essential to high student and staff achievement, to the free exchange of ideas central to a quality educational process, and to the development of youth as thoughtful participants in our democracy.

Intent of Policy

It is the intent of the District to promote, through this policy, mutual respect, civility, and orderly conduct among district employees, students, parents/guardians, Board members, and other members of the public. The school environment should be characterized by positive interpersonal relationships and discourse among students and between students and staff. It is also the intent of this policy to encourage positive communication and discourage disruptive, volatile, hostile, or aggressive communication or actions. It is not the District's intent to deprive any person of his/her right to freedom of expression. The District encourages the public's cooperation with and adherence to this policy.

Students shall be taught that democracy requires civil discourse in which individuals listen to others, even if they disagree; defend their viewpoints with evidence, reason, or personal experience; recognize valid disagreements; reconsider positions in light of new evidence; and compromise in the interest of the common good.

Democratic societies thrive on dissent, discussion and debate. Too often our society provides poor role models for children trying to learn the skills to be effective, active, and responsible participants in our democratic society. The need exists to put aside our entrenched positions and hold open conversations about the many issues facing our communities.

Civil approaches to public discourse start from the point of view that every perspective merits consideration. Democracy requires compromise and the task is to find the intersecting points of agreement that benefit the community; this is the delicate art of governance and democracy.

Community Relations

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Intent of Policy (continued)

Civil discourse requires a person to express ideas in ways that are respectful and informed, expressive and reasonable. It includes, but exceeds, merely being polite. It is about responding rather than reacting, understanding more than arguing, listening as much as talking, and believing in the process even when one is unpersuaded by another's ideas.

Need to Model Civic Discourse

The Board and District staff need to serve as beacons and instructors of civic consciousness and behavior.

The Board, as educational leaders, has an obligation to model civil discourse in its deliberations, allowing for the thoughtful, beneficial productive exchange of ideas. Further, District schools need to teach children conflict resolution and consensus building skills. Our responsibility is to instill in students that appropriate civil discourse is always essential. Discussions involving challenging and sometimes contentious political and/or cultural topics must and will be handled in a thoughtful, respectful and constructive manner.

It is the Board's belief that a civil environment should be free of abusive behavior and threats. Positive human interaction is required by and among all Board members, teachers, administrators, staff, parents and the general public. This policy aims to establish, to the extent possible and reasonable, a safe, civil harassment-free workplace for our students and staff.

The best way to ensure an environment of civility and civil discourse is to constantly practice it. Modeling the appropriate behavior sends a sound message that people and discourse must be treated with respect. Board members shall model these skills in their own conduct.

In addition, through participation in school activities and/or school-sponsored activities, students, staff, parents, community members, and administrators shall be accountable for the promotion of and demonstration of civil conduct, communication, and problem-solving throughout the District or at locations of school-sponsored activities.

The District is committed to support this expectation and will not condone or accept uncivil conduct on school grounds, at school-sponsored activities, or in verbal, written or electronic communications whether by students, staff, administrators, parents, or community members.

Our classrooms need to become the best models of how to participate in respectful, productive and civil discussions. Public schools have the potential to expose children to multiple and diverse perspectives on a variety of issues, enriching their lives while planting the seeds for an enlivened democratic society.

Community Relations

Promoting Civil Discourse (continued)

Civil Environments

This policy demands that all District schools and offices shall be civil environments. A civil environment is free from abusive behavior and threats. Abusive behavior is defined as the use of obscenities, yelling, defamatory language or any threatening behavior in order to intimidate or otherwise berate someone. A threat is defined as any act which disrupts or threatens to disrupt school or office operations, puts the health and safety of any individual at risk, willfully causes property damage, or uses loud or offensive language that could provoke a violent or negative reaction. The schools shall promote nonviolent conflict resolution techniques in order to encourage attitudes and behaviors that foster harmonious relations. As part of this effort students shall be taught the skills necessary to reduce violence and deescalate conflict, including communication skills, anger management, bias reduction and mediation skills.

Staff in all District facilities and at all school events shall work to foster an environment in which people are encouraged to grow socially by participating in healthy dialogue in respectful ways. Rude, abusive or intolerant behavior or discourse will not be tolerated. Staff in all District facilities and at all District events will model respectful behavior and discourse, thereby fostering positive communication and a civil environment.

Civil discourse is defined as the language of dispassionate objectivity. It requires respect of the other participants; it neither diminishes the other's moral worth, nor questions their good judgement; it avoids hostility, direct antagonism, or excessive persuasion; it requires modesty and an appreciation for the other individual's experiences.

The use of "fighting words" or epithets is prohibited in those instances where the speech is abusive and insulting, rather than a communication of ideas, and the speech is used in an abusive manner in a situation that presents an actual danger that it will cause a breach of the peace.

One of education's major tasks is to teach students how to form and support their opinions.

Teachers are responsible for what happens in their classrooms and promoting civil discourse must be among their top priorities. They should model civil speech and behavior, but also establish clear boundaries for students, create a climate that nourishes courteous exchange, and help build vocabularies that enable them to discuss issues without resorting to slang, profanity, trite expressions and shouting.

District staff shall guide students through opportunities to speak about critical, sensitive, issues. Clear guidelines for class conversations shall be established in which differing ideas/viewpoints can be discussed in an atmosphere of respect, empathy and civility.

One of the most powerful actions we can teach students is to engage in respectful conversations; the foundation for civil discourse.

Community Relations

Promoting Civil Discourse (continued)

- (cf. 0521 – Nondiscrimination)
- (cf. 1120 – Public Participation at Board of Education Meetings)
- (cf. 1250 – Visits to the Schools)
- (cf. 1251 – Loitering or Causing Disturbances)
- (cf. 1316 – Conduct on School Property)
- (cf. 1316.2 – Civility)
- (cf. 1320 – Relations between the Public and School Personnel)
- (cf. 1330 – Use of School Facilities)
- (cf. 1700 – Otherwise Lawful Possession of Firearms on School Property)
- (cf. 3517.2 – Vandalism)
- (cf. 5131.911 – Bullying)
- (cf. 5144 – Controversial Issues)
- (cf. 5145.51 – Sexual Harassment)
- (cf. 6114.7 – Safe Schools)
- (cf. 6145.22 – Sportsmanship)
- (cf. 9273 – Civility Code)

- Legal Reference: Connecticut General Statutes
- 1-225 Meetings of the government agents to be public.
 - 1-232 Conduct of the meeting.
 - 10-220 Duties of boards of education.
 - 10-221 Boards of education to prescribe rule(s), policies, and procedures.
 - 10-239 Use of school facilities for other purposes.
 - 53a-185 Loitering in or about school grounds: Class C misdemeanor.

Policy adopted: September 19, 2019

MONTVILLE PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Montville, Connecticut