

The Importance and Practice of Informed Civil Discourse

Students want to talk about the things that matter most. Plenty happens around the world, and in their own backyard, that students want to talk about—things they hear on the news; things they read about online; things their parents talk about at the dinner table. While students want to talk about these important and, oftentimes, charged topics, they don't always know how to do that, and they often don't have a place to do that. An important function of education is to help students explore and participate in the market place of ideas that a democratic society encourages, all the while learning how to respect the opinions and perspectives of others. Schools can help in three ways:

- they can teach their students how to become *informed*
- they can have students practice being *civil*
- and they can create forums for student *discourse*.

INFORMED

While students might want to talk about what matters most, they often have little or no information about the issues. Here are some things schools can do to teach students to become informed.

- Share resources with students where they can find accurate and balanced information.
- Help students evaluate the places they get information currently, especially online resources and social media.
- Utilize on-campus student groups that know how to do research to provide models for what it looks like to be informed about an issue: the debate team, the mock trial team, the newspaper staff or broadcasting club.

CIVIL

Unfortunately, the media offers many examples of incivility and few examples of politeness and tact when it comes to people talking about what matters most. Here are some ways schools can help students practice civility.

- Teach students the rules of engagement (that they don't see on tv): critique ideas, not people; listen and take turns talking; if someone is getting their feelings hurt, back down.
- Help students connect with each other, not just their ideas, by addressing each other and using their proper name, not a pronoun.
- Encourage students to think of the "other" by creating experiences for them to take on the voice of people from different backgrounds and who have had different experiences than their own.
- Have a word or phrase that students can use to let others know if they have crossed the line, such as "red light" or "flag on the play."

DISCOURSE

Students don't get many opportunities to practice discourse about charged topics. If we want students to be good at it, then schools need to create forums for students to do it. Here are some examples.

- Have students engage in debate-style activities in a variety of classes on a variety of volatile topics, where both sides are presented equally.
- Employ small student groups, such as advisories, to debrief current heated local and world events.
- Have moderated "town hall meetings" where students can come to discuss a specific topic or a hot button event.

Kevin Mullally, Marist School, Atlanta, GA

via CSEE, an organization which partners with independent schools to apply the latest evidence-based research in the realm of character development, and to share best practices.