

Civil Discourse in the Classroom and Beyond

Our role as a school is to give students the tools and information they need in order to engage in critical thinking, and form their own opinions and value systems so that they can be involved members of our shared society. Authentic civil discourse requires being open to others' points of view, listening courteously and respectfully, assuming all parties' best intentions, and refraining from ad hominem arguments as we seek ways to build community.

Hathaway Brown's Community Agreement asks faculty, staff, and school administrators to uphold a number of important tenets that are informed by our school mission.

Several of those calls to action inform the way we approach civil discourse in the classroom and beyond.

Encourage and engage in honest, open, trustworthy and courteous two-way communication toward all members of the community.

In order to create an environment that can effectively support difficult conversations, we must start by striving to model constructive civil discourse ourselves. We have to be aware of our own strongly held beliefs, political positions, emotional responses, and biases and be thoughtful about how they influence what we say and do when the headlines enter into the classroom.

Provide a safe and inclusive environment for all; especially the expression of different points of view and the rich cultural diversity of our community.

Some topics can feel particularly difficult to address in the classroom—e.g., issues related to race, immigration, and religion. Teachers can help students practice having constructive, civil dialogue, characterized by listening respectfully to multiple perspectives. It is helpful to reassure all in our community that their feelings are valid and their contributions to the discussion are valuable.

Provide a healthy and balanced environment where we all can strive to give our best effort.

A reflective classroom community is in many ways a microcosm of democracy—a place where explicit rules and implicit norms protect everyone's right to speak; where different perspectives can be heard and valued; where members take responsibility for themselves, each other, and the group as a whole; and where each member has a stake and a voice in collective decisions. Once established, it's the responsibility of all to continue to nurture it.

