RIVERDALE

CAMPUS DISCOURSE: TEACHING & LEARNING RESOURCES

“

Try far harder to catch the other person’s point of view and to draw it out, rather than repress it.

”

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FOUNDER OF RIVERDALE COUNTRY SCHOOL

INTRODUCTION

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These short essays were produced by the teaching faculty at Riverdale Country School in collaboration with students, administrators, and trustees. They are intended as classroom resources to complement the school's Statement on Campus Discourse. In future years, we hope to revise this document and add new materials.

While the sections of this document form a coherent whole, we encourage teachers and students to focus on excerpts that feel most relevant to their current needs and interests. In particular, these materials address questions that often arise in the classroom:

- → *How is conversation related to learning?*
- → *How do we cultivate the types of relationships that foster intellectually rich, open discourse?*
- → *What are the concrete, practical things we can do to elevate the quality of a conversation?*
- → *When our interests or perspectives place us in conflict, how can we continue to learn with and from one another?*
- → *Why might we want to protect the ability of students and teachers to talk freely with one another about controversial issues?*
- → *What is "hateful or abusive speech" and why does Riverdale prohibit it?*

We hope that these materials will also help other schools formulate their own answers to these questions.

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WHY GO TO SCHOOL?

The question isn't "Why learn?" Instead, the question is "Why go to school to learn?" Why seek out a physical campus where teachers and students congregate for the purpose of learning?

The deepest understanding of something—a novel, a math problem, an historical event—is almost always constructed in collaboration with other people. The reason to go to school is to gain interlocutors. An interlocutor is a conversation partner. At school, you gain classmates and teachers who will talk with you, who will join you in posing questions and grappling to find answers. This pedagogy—conversation, discussion, dialogue—is a powerful engine of learning because conversation demands thinking that is reflective, flexible, and spontaneous.

Conversation is an especially crucial tool for understanding other people. While we share much in common, people within our community and the broader world hold dramatically different, sometimes incompatible beliefs and values. These varied perspectives define us as individuals and shape the character of our communities. When we do not enter into open, honest dialogue with one another, we are free to imagine other people as we wish. In conversation, we revise our interpretations of one another in light of what we actually say and do.

If the purpose of coming to school is the opportunity to learn through conversation, all of us—students, parents, teachers, staff, administrators—confront a fundamental question: what do we want conversation at school to look like? What kind of discourse on campus do we want to make possible and nurture?

The reason to go to school is to gain interlocutors.

An interlocutor is a conversation partner.

Ultimately, this question is about our relationships with one another. The character of a conversation—its purpose, depth, and feel—is most often shaped by the relationships among the people doing the talking. Do we trust one another or are we suspicious and guarded? Are we seeking to collaborate in order to learn or are we adversaries in conflict? Are we knit together by mutual care or separated by indifference?

What kind of relationships will enable us to speak freely and fearlessly, to listen with curiosity and courage, and to learn together? What are the practical, concrete things we can do to create the kind of open discourse that makes it worthwhile to show up for school?

TRUST, CARE, AND CURIOSITY

When you enter our classrooms at the start of the school year, we teachers usually don't know most of you, our students. Yet, we immediately treat you as people who matter to us. You don't have to convince us to care about you or to help you flourish. That's our default position. This type of relationship is crucial to fostering open discourse.

When you enter into conversations with us, we strive to make you feel secure and confident that we care for you—because we do. We recognize what you don't yet know and we help you grow in knowledge; we notice your interests, sometimes even before you do, and we try to inspire you to learn more; we anticipate your fears and we do our best to make you feel courageous, supported, and cared for. As the year unfolds, our efforts accomplish a dramatic transformation: you are no longer strangers to us. This ethos of care—that we are here to help you flourish, that we are your allies rather than your adversaries—fosters conversations that yield learning, that help you understand new perspectives and construct your own. Facilitating this type of discourse is one of the greatest expressions of care that we can offer you as teachers.

What do you stand to gain from transforming the strangers among your classmates into people whose ideas, emotions, and questions matter to you?

Most of your relationships, though, are with your peers. And it's also your peers who talk and interact with you the most. Do you owe them the same kind of care that you receive from your teachers? What do you stand to gain from transforming the strangers among your classmates into people whose ideas, emotions, and questions matter to you?

Trust, care, and curiosity make constructive discourse possible.

Consider the very real alternative.

Out in the world, many conversations are waged as battles. People frequently view their conversation partners as adversaries, not intellectual collaborators. For them, the point of a discussion is to relentlessly advance one's own point of view, to persuade. The "winner" is the person whose views didn't change; the "loser" is the person who was persuaded.

TRUST, CARE, AND CURIOSITY

In a classroom or the cafeteria, you might find yourself arguing in this way because you feel inspired, outraged, or defensive. Maybe you just want to impress your teacher or friends. Sometimes you might lapse into this mode of discourse without even making a conscious choice. These moments often happen when you're talking to people whom you don't know well, but discourse can break down even when you're talking with loved ones and close friends. We've all had arguments in which we didn't hear the other person's perspective or spoke past one another. Why does this happen? Because we're not fulfilling the promise that draws people into relationships with one another in the first place: "I'll care for you and I'll trust that you'll care for me. I'll seek to understand what you're thinking and feeling."

Trust, care, and curiosity make constructive discourse possible. Teachers have spent years cultivating the ability and desire to offer these gifts to our students. You do not share our professional responsibilities, but we hope and expect that, in your relationships with your peers, you'll aspire to the kind of care that we model for you. If you want to benefit from a school community in which you can rigorously pursue questions that matter to you and express yourself freely and openly, demonstrating that you care about one another is the vital first step. You cannot remain strangers to one another.

LISTENING

When you enter into a conversation with a peer or even with a teacher, what's your purpose? A conversation requires your time as well as your intellectual and emotional energy. Why are you investing yourself in the interaction? What are you hoping for?

If you're aiming to have an authentic, open exchange in which you and your interlocutors are able to learn together, the most crucial thing you can do is listen well. Listening is more than just being quiet so that you can hear someone's words. To listen means to look for and notice how someone is responding emotionally and intellectually to you. It's one of the most powerful ways to show trust, care, and curiosity.

Intellectually rich, open discourse is not a right to which you and your classmates are entitled. It is a collective achievement made possible by your relationships with one another.

A desire to listen is also why people enter into conversation in the first place. When you choose to say something aloud, you're making public a thought that could've remained in the privacy of your mind. Why do you want an audience? Why not keep those words to yourself? Ultimately, we speak to other people because we're interested in listening to their responses. I want you to hear me because I want to hear you respond.

Free, open discourse requires that we demonstrate genuine interest and concern for how someone else understands the words we've spoken and the way that we're talking with one another. If your purpose for entering into conversation is to learn, you need to recognize that exchange requires more than just your willingness to say what's on your mind: you also have to cultivate the conditions that make your conversation partner eager to speak freely in response to you. Intellectually rich, open discourse is not a right to which you and your classmates are entitled. It is a collective achievement made possible by your relationships with one another.

So, how can you accomplish this?

LISTENING

WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you want to have a conversation in which you and your interlocutors feel able to share your honest thoughts and learn from one another, your words and actions need to signal that you care for the people around you. Even if and especially when you disagree or hold dramatically different values, you need to show your conversation partners that you value them:

→ *"Because you're part of this conversation, I care about what's going on in your mind. Your questions and ideas matter to me. I want to listen to you. I think it's worthwhile to listen to you. I devote energy to responding to your questions and ideas because I care about you.*

→ *"If you're not speaking, I care about where your head is and what you might be wondering or theorizing. I care if you seem distant, tired, or upset—I try to figure out how to give you energy and connect with you.*

→ *"I care what you think about me, not because I want to impress you or because I'm afraid of you, but because I want you to recognize me as someone who cares about you. I want my words and actions to communicate to you that I would feel a loss if you weren't in the room.*

→ *"I value your presence because I know that your thoughts, questions, and confusion make possible a depth of understanding that I couldn't reach on my own."*

LISTENING

WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you don't value the people you're talking with, then you're not going to be able to learn together. And you probably should reconsider why you're choosing to engage in the conversation at all. Another way to think about this: if you want to learn through conversation, you need to adopt a stance of intellectual and emotional generosity. Here's how you can do that:

SHOW GRATITUDE.

You can't compel someone to reveal their perspective to you or to be curious about your thinking. Show gratitude for being able to talk with one another and learn together.

WATCH YOUR AIRTIME AND DON'T INTERRUPT.

To make sure that everyone has a chance to participate in the conversation, you need to be able to pause your own voice—even when no one else seems ready to speak. It's good for a conversation to have moments of silence so that everyone can think for a bit or so a new voice can join the discussion. When you pause your own voice, you're also creating space for people to ask you questions. Leaving space for questions is a sign that you care whether people actually understood what you said (which means that you care about their responses).

BE CURIOUS ABOUT WHY SOMEONE ISN'T SPEAKING.

In large group discussions, there are usually a few people who don't speak. Sometimes, they're afraid of humiliation or judgment. Most of the time, though, these people aren't actually afraid of critique. They retreat into silence because of the affect, tone, or vibe of other group members. Be aware of how you're conducting yourself. What might need to change for more people to participate in the conversation?

SEEK TO UNDERSTAND PEOPLE'S IDEAS BY ASKING QUESTIONS AND LISTENING CAREFULLY.

The best initial response to someone's words is to ask or say things that will help you better understand their ideas. If you jump straight to articulating your own point of view, you've missed an opportunity to draw out your interlocutor's thinking. When you share your own ideas too soon, you're responding to an incomplete picture of what your interlocutor believes.

LISTENING

WHAT YOU CAN DO

GIVE HELP.

Especially if you think you disagree with something your interlocutor said, ask questions and share ideas that help your interlocutor better communicate their own thoughts. The first step in critique is often support. You need to know what they actually think. When you attribute to your interlocutor a perspective that they don't actually hold, you and your interlocutor will become frustrated when you "disagree."

ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR CONFUSION.

If you can't distill what the previous speaker just said, you shouldn't share your own ideas or start a new thread of conversation. You definitely must speak, though: you need to ask that person, or others in the room, to clarify. Admit that you're feeling confused about what they said and ask questions so that you can understand them better. Acknowledging your confusion is a profound form of respect. If you didn't care what someone thinks, you wouldn't bother to clear up any of your confusion. There are lots of options:

→ *"Hey. Can we back up for a second? What did you actually mean by that?"*

→ *"I'm sorry to pause our conversation, but I'm lost. Can someone summarize what we've been saying?"*

→ *"I think I'm getting confused. Can I try to summarize what I think we've been saying?"*

→ *"Hold on. I understood the first thing you said, but the second part didn't make sense to me. Can you explain that again?"*

→ *"Can we go back to ___ in the text? I'm still not quite getting it."*

Likewise, if someone else asks you to clarify your thinking, be grateful. They're demonstrating that they care enough about you to ensure that they understand what you really think.

OFFER EVIDENCE FOR WHAT YOU BELIEVE AND ACKNOWLEDGE WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW.

Alert the group to when you're talking about facts and when you're veering more into your own judgment concerning those facts. Remember that some facts are more contested than others; be curious and willing to listen to someone else's account of the facts. It's often during this part of a conversation that you'll discover the crux of someone's point of view. Be faithful to the evidence: ask for it and be ready to offer it.

LISTENING

WHAT YOU CAN DO

NOTICE AND RESPOND TO PEOPLE'S EMOTIONS AS WELL AS THEIR INTELLECTUAL ARGUMENTS.

Keep track of how you and your interlocutor are feeling as the conversation unfolds. If you start to feel nervous, angry, or unsettled, check in with the person you're talking to: "Hey, can we pause for a second? I need to tell you that I'm feeling ___ right now. Here's why: ___." If you can sense that your interlocutor might feel upset, find out what's going on. Human beings are not just intellectual machines that coldly transmit arguments to one another. The way we speak and listen to one another can make us feel cared for and valued or abused and disrespected. Likewise, specific arguments can be freighted with intense emotions that relate to our individual experiences, values, and identities. If you want to maintain open discourse with someone, you can't ignore the emotional currents of your conversation or expect your interlocutor to shut off their feelings. Remember, your interlocutor seeks your trust, care, and curiosity.

MAKE SPACE FOR GRACE; REPAIR MISTAKES.

Our words can cause pain, whether we intend to or not. Often, we hurt other people through language because we don't know or ignore something important about who they are. Just as often, we insult or anger other people because we make mistakes in our word choice and tone. You will do this to someone else and it will happen to you. So, make space for grace: allow someone to make a mistake and recover from it. Decide for yourself when and why someone deserves your patience. When you've figured that out, follow through. If you have no tolerance for people who make mistakes and try to repair them, then you'll only be able to have conversations with a tiny group of people. Likewise, take responsibility for repairing an injury that you caused with your words, intentionally or not. Push through your defensiveness, embarrassment, or guilt and take care of what really matters: restoring the relationship of trust and care that makes open discourse possible.

WALK AWAY OR SEEK HELP IF A CONVERSATION FEELS UNSAFE OR IF YOU CAN'T PARTICIPATE CONSTRUCTIVELY.

Most of the time, people who trust and care for one another make an effort to talk about the links between the intellectual content of a conversation and the emotions they're feeling. Often, exploring these links is necessary to develop a deeper understanding of the issue at stake and the perspectives of the people in a conversation. But sometimes, a conversation shouldn't or can't continue. If someone threatens you or acts in an abusive way, get help. When you do feel safe but your emotions prevent you from listening well and demonstrating care for someone else's point of view, take a break or ask someone else to speak while you recalibrate. Be alert to the effects of anger. You might have very good reason to feel angry, but if your outrage is provoking you to shout at other people, you might cause them to misunderstand and misrepresent what you actually think.

LISTENING

WHAT YOU CAN DO

EMBRACE DENSE, CONFUSING, INTRICATE COMPLEXITY.

A question or topic that feels worthy of our attention is rarely simple. Embrace dense, confusing, intricate complexity. Likewise, accept the fact that while two truths might appear mutually exclusive, that doesn't mean they actually are. Reality can be contradictory and paradoxical.

PATIENTLY ACCEPT A LACK OF CLEAR-CUT RESOLUTION.

Work harder to cultivate a disposition of questioning, the instinct to relentlessly probe and explore. Much of your experience as a student has trained you to believe that learning happens when you listen to someone else's tidy answer to a question and that evidence of your own learning is your ability to neatly and cleanly resolve a question or problem. This instinct to generate answers is motivated by the sense of completion you feel, the confidence that you've learned something and you can move on to the next thing that you need to know. Be grateful for the chance to talk, even (or especially) when you leave with more questions than answers.

When you make these moves in a conversation, you do more than just speak and listen: you fulfill the role of a facilitator, someone who elevates the quality of discourse. Imagine what we could achieve if we all felt responsible for facilitating conversation, not just adding to it.

ADVOCACY & CONFLICT

What are you supposed to do when you're discussing something controversial or an issue that places you in conflict with other people? At school, is this type of conversation allowed?

Absolutely. Your teachers are committed to preparing you for participation in the conflicts of democratic life. We teach you how to weigh evidence, make arguments, and form your own conceptions of how people should live together and share power in a democracy. We teach you tools of persuasion and the importance of advocacy. This begins here on campus: we support and expect you to advocate for yourselves as children in a school community mostly controlled by adults. We also support you in your desires to participate in public protests and to communicate with elected officials. We are proud that Riverdale is a place where you learn what advocacy is and how to do it.

When our interests seem to place us in conflict, how can we continue to learn with and from one another?

If we as individuals are enmeshed in the political, cultural, and economic conflicts of society, how can we honor the purpose of school and do more than simply entrench ourselves in beliefs we already hold?

But the conflicts of democratic life don't just lie waiting outside the bounds of our campus. These conflicts play out at school and there are "winners" and "losers" on campus too, particularly in school communities like ours that are diverse with respect to gender, sexuality, race, class, and political ideology. Our personal concerns and ways of seeing the world don't disappear when we come to school. When we deliberate with one another about curriculum, admissions, allocation of resources, and school climate, our individual perspectives are shaped by issues contested in the public sphere, issues in which all of us—students, parents, teachers, staff, administrators—have stakes. And just like in the "real world," each of us holds different degrees and kinds of power that advantage us in some democratic conflicts, and disadvantage us in others.

When we gather at school in order to learn, it's unreasonable and unethical to expect everyone to leave behind the values, perspectives, and histories that matter most to us. When we engage in conversation, especially here, we can and should feel welcome to defend our interests and perspectives. But when our interests seem to place us in conflict, how can we continue to learn with and from one another? If we as individuals are enmeshed in the political, cultural, and economic conflicts of society, how can we honor the purpose of school and do more than simply entrench ourselves in beliefs we already hold?

ADVOCACY & CONFLICT

To cultivate a discourse of learning, we need to begin by talking to ourselves: "What are the facts about my self—how I live my life, what I believe, and who I am—that might explain why some people see me as an ally and others see me as a threat? Do I embrace the kind of power that the world seems to grant me or that I've acquired for myself? When my relationship with someone else is freighted with conflict, do I hope to negotiate and resolve that conflict or dominate and win? What are the criteria I use to decide how to approach the different conflicts in which I'm enmeshed?"

We each need to reflect on our own position at Riverdale, in America, and the world at large not only to achieve self-knowledge, but also to understand how other people might see us in relation to themselves. Thinking about ourselves in this way is a form of demonstrating care and curiosity about other people.

You can't easily do this type of work in the moments before a conversation starts or in the middle of a heated discussion. But it's possible, depending on why you and your interlocutors want to talk.

Two or more "opposing sides" might choose to enter into conversation for many reasons: to convey their understanding of what the conflict is about, to make demands, or to negotiate a compromise. Try to remember the last time you spoke with someone about a high-stakes issue that placed you in conflict. Why were you engaging each other in conversation? Were you trying to resolve the conflict or simply advocate your position? How did your goal shape the character of your conversation?

Unfortunately, people often overlook a crucial lesson about advocacy: no matter what interest we want to protect and no matter what message we want others to hear, we will fail as advocates if all we know how to do is relentlessly advance our own point of view.

We will also undermine democratic life itself. If we only fight insistently for our own positions, our form of engagement with other people boils down to a strategy of annihilation: "my interlocutors, my fellow citizens, must either believe what I believe or they must be silenced." This strategy is politically unwise and intellectually dishonest. As citizens, if we don't want our political opponents to someday silence us, then we need to practice a form of advocacy that includes a willingness to learn.

At school, we want you to share your genuine beliefs. We also want you to be able to acknowledge your own limitations: the possibility that you might not adequately understand something or someone, that your political or ideological "enemies" might be more complicated than you think. If your plan for how to "change the world for the good" does not incorporate this type of humility, you will struggle as an advocate and as a learner. If you're able to listen receptively—to be curious about your interlocutor's point of view and urgently seek to understand it—you will unlock the possibility for constructive change.

ADVOCACY & CONFLICT

Not only might your position on an issue evolve, you and your interlocutor might develop an entirely new interpretation of the issues at stake. We teachers are always open to the possibility of ourselves experiencing this type of shift. The chance of this happening is one reason we feel excited to teach you.

Being open to discovering someone else's point of view is especially hard when you're trying to stand up for what you believe is right. This is what genuine dialogue requires. At Riverdale, members of our community can meet this challenge because of our relationships with one another. We trust that we care for one another and that we want to learn from one another, even when we're in conflict. When we want to have conversations about topics that matter dearly to us or that are highly controversial within our own community, we make good on the implicit promise of any conversation: we speak because we want to listen. We aim for the resolution of the conflict rather than victory.

When interlocutors combine advocacy with a desire to understand, their conversations often don't conclude in a thesis statement or clear plan for the future. Instead, the most engaging, worthwhile discussions can feel unresolved because they generate more complexity.

Conflict resolution always involves learning, the willingness to revise our perspectives in light of what we learn during conversation. To genuinely resolve a conflict, people have to do more than just negotiate a compromise. Resolution involves a loosening of tension, an untying of the knot at the core of the problem. This process begins when people in conflict seek knowledge of one another and are willing to be changed by what they learn.

"Resolution" doesn't necessarily mean "reconciliation." When you're able to understand and accept the reality of someone else's perspective, you might become even more confident that truth and justice are on your side. Understanding how someone else sees the world can help you better advocate for your own position. If you're truly listening to "the other side," your own view will most likely become more nuanced.

When interlocutors combine advocacy with a desire to understand, their conversations often don't conclude in a thesis statement or clear plan for the future. Instead, the most engaging, worthwhile discussions can feel unresolved because they generate more complexity. "Deeper understanding" is precisely this: we replace a comparatively simple interpretation of an issue with a more complex one. When the participants in a conversation choose to learn rather than debate, the conversation usually results in a "zeroing-in" on the fault lines of complexity and disagreement. There will be insights and resolutions along the way, but an excellent conversation unearths a rich layer of questions, tensions, and problems that initially were buried beneath the surface.

THE ROLE OF TEACHERS

Our aim as educators is to help you become informed, critical, and independent thinkers.

Teachers are not here to convert you to our way of seeing the world. Like everyone else in a democratic society, teachers participate in political struggles and advocate for particular outcomes. But in our classrooms, our teaching looks very different from advocacy. It might seem odd, then, that teaching and advocacy can fail for the same reason. Just as you and we fail in our advocacy efforts when we're unable to learn from others, teachers fail as educators when our pedagogy amounts only to telling you what we think.

Our aim as educators is to help you become informed, critical, and independent thinkers. We wield authority in the classroom, but we promise to encourage and equip you to confront that authority using knowledge and skills that you learn from us. Not only do you learn more and better when you question us, we want you to respond honestly to our ideas because we recognize that our perspectives are, by definition, partial. We know a lot, but we don't know everything; we view the world from a vantage point that we have achieved through careful study and reflection, but we don't see everything. No one does. That's why we rarely portray our understanding of an issue or topic as "objective."

Instead, we teach you about the reasoning and evidence that shape our judgments. Yes, truth exists and people can be wrong about the facts, but even the most unshakeable conclusions of modern science are the result of choices about how to measure, conceptualize, and investigate a particular feature of the world. When an issue or question is in serious dispute, your teachers (and scientists) make a special effort to account for the differences between our beliefs and those of other experts in the field. We aim to equip you to examine our arguments and evaluate them with a critical eye so that you can do the same with your own beliefs. The ability to scrutinize your own point of view is essential to being a free and independent thinker.

As your teachers, we ask you to trust our professionalism and commitment to your intellectual growth. We will never assign your work lower grades because you hold different values from our own or because you've reached an alternative conclusion. When we assign grades and give you feedback, we are evaluating the intellectual work that is central to all scholarship: reasoning and use of evidence, clarity of argumentation, and fair consideration of opposing points of view. We recognize that it takes courage to challenge the

THE ROLE OF TEACHERS

authority of a teacher and to publicly disagree with someone, especially if you are in the minority. Please know: you are safe. We will never punish you for disagreeing with us. To do so would undermine not only your trust in us, but also the personal investment we make in you when we engage with your ideas.

When we read your essays or respond to you in class, we're making a personal attempt to understand your thinking and take your ideas seriously. We're sharing a part of ourselves with you. The goal of our investment is your growth, not your agreement. We feel proud when you disagree with us and bolster your argument using the skills and knowledge that you've learned. Likewise, when your intellectual work doesn't satisfy the standards of rigorous argumentation, we promise not to reward you simply for saying something we support. Instead, we'll offer you critique and suggestions for how to improve your work. We hope that you will be open with us and share your individual thoughts and beliefs. Remember our promise to you: we are here for you, we want to make you feel confident and cared for, and we want you to learn. We are rooting for you.

We share our judgments with you so that you can begin to grapple with the complexity of human understanding: the most knowledgeable, expert scholars see the world differently from one another and interpret facts in light of different values and concerns.

In order to be the dedicated, challenging, and inspiring teachers you want us to be, we also place our trust in you. We trust you to recognize us as individual thinkers who are defined by our knowledge and perspectives, to understand that excellent teaching depends on our ability to formulate considered judgments based on our own expertise and values. We share our judgments with you so that you can begin to grapple with the complexity of human understanding: the most knowledgeable, expert scholars see the world differently from one another and interpret facts in light of different values and concerns. Our job is not to "let the facts speak for themselves." Our job is to equip you to pose questions, share insights, and make arguments. We want you to be able to form your own responses to questions like, "Which facts matter? What do they mean?"

A crucial way to prepare you for this type of intellectual work is to model it for you—to show you what it looks like to be a free, independent thinker. When you're in our classes, we want you to notice that the questions we're asking and the ideas we're offering—just like the books you read and the essays you write—are the products of a real person, someone guided by specific interests, values, and expertise. You're no different. You too approach your learning from a specific perspective. We hope that you're curious about why and how your own point of view might differ from ours. And when you ask us probing questions or disagree with us, we feel thankful for the conversation and confident that our efforts have paid off. When you are willing to engage with your teachers as individual thinkers, you inspire us to do the same for you.

WHY IS HATEFUL SPEECH NOT ALLOWED AT RIVERDALE?

Riverdale is committed to empowering lifelong learners by developing minds, building character, and creating community in order to change our world for the good.

To fulfill our mission, it is essential for the school to encourage and support freedom of expression. Both out in the world and at Riverdale, people need to be able to speak freely in order to learn, work, and live together.

But freedom of expression is neither our only value nor our most important one. As a school, Riverdale is committed to cultivating the character of young people: you, our students. We believe that your intellectual growth is tightly linked to your growth as ethical human beings. We ask of you—and ourselves—more than rigorous argumentation and independent thinking. We also ask that we care for one another and that we collaborate in the service of learning.

You know from your experiences both in and outside the classroom that hateful, abusive speech corrodes the ethos of care that makes constructive discourse possible.

At Riverdale, community members and invited guests may not engage in abusive or hateful speech that undermines our efforts to foster an equitable, diverse, and inclusive learning environment. We believe that all members of our community deserve to feel that they belong here and that the community values their presence. When you extend this type of care to one another, you empower yourselves to learn deeply through free, open conversation.

WHAT IS HATEFUL SPEECH?

Hateful speech is a specific form of abuse that incites or promotes hatred of a person or group of people on the basis of their identity. The school's harassment policy enumerates some of the most common categories of identity: race, national origin, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, gender, and sex. Riverdale does not tolerate hateful speech in any form—images, jokes, innuendo, microaggressions and other insults—because hateful speech hurts. Everyday experience teaches us that words are powerful: what we say and hear can make us laugh in joy or cower in fear. Regardless of a speaker's intentions, hateful speech can cause its targets to feel excluded, degraded, and afraid.

Regardless of a speaker's intentions, hateful speech can cause its targets to feel excluded, degraded, and afraid.

Here at school, students can disagree with one another and respond to one another's beliefs with disapproval.

The most common targets of hateful speech are members of minority and marginalized groups. Because of their identities, members of these groups navigate life against the currents of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other systems of oppression. Hateful speech gives voice to the contempt and prejudice that animate these toxic systems.

Legitimate political speech might challenge the conduct and/or beliefs of a group of people, but it does not disparage their personhood or suggest that certain characteristics render them permanently unworthy of dignity and respect.

Not all expressions of dislike or disapproval are based on an individual or group's identity. The school welcomes legitimate political speech that might express dislike or disapproval of a group's conduct and/or beliefs. For example, the school encourages students to formulate their own judgments about the platforms of political parties. To become responsible citizens, students can and should express affirmation or disapproval of specific agendas and the voters, activists, and politicians who support these agendas. Here at school, students can disagree with one another and respond to one another's beliefs with disapproval. But hateful speech is different from political disagreement; hateful speech stigmatizes and stereotypes a target group by ascribing to it a set of defining characteristics that are viewed as highly undesirable, inherent, and ineliminable. Legitimate political speech might challenge the conduct and/or beliefs of a group of people, but it does not disparage their personhood or suggest that certain characteristics render them permanently unworthy of dignity and respect.[1]

[1] Bhiku Parekh, "Hate speech: is there a case for banning?" *Public Policy Research*, Vol. 12 No. 4 (February 2006), 214.

WHAT IS HATEFUL SPEECH?

To equip students to change our world for the good and to maintain free, open discourse on campus, Riverdale seeks to fulfill two joint responsibilities with respect to hateful speech:

First, we create educational experiences in which we ask students to grapple with intolerance so that they better understand its causes, forms, and remedies. Intolerance and hatred are ever-present in the broader world and in the lives of our students. We offer our students knowledge and skills with which they can interpret their experience and effectively respond to hatred. When we confront students with examples of intolerance, we communicate our purpose to students and remain attuned to their social and emotional needs. By doing so, we aim to ensure that the benefit of exposing students to hateful speech will be greater than the harm such speech might inflict.

Second, in our own community, we prevent and respond to hateful speech that can diminish our students' ability to learn. In the school's supervision of speech on campus, we seek to distinguish between speech that contributes to learning and speech that disrupts it. Fulfilling this responsibility is especially difficult because, as individuals, we experience words differently. Language that seems hateful to one person can seem unproblematic to another; the same words might provoke mild annoyance in one listener, but intense pain in another. We expect students to engage one another with empathy. We also help them learn that arguments that challenge or threaten their interests or values are not necessarily hateful arguments.

All faculty members and especially school leaders (Head of School, Division Heads, Deans) are responsible for identifying, preventing, and responding to speech that compromises our students' ability to learn. Our efforts are guided by feedback from students and the knowledge that, with respect to the harms of hateful speech, the most vulnerable members of our community are students from minority and marginalized groups.

The school's dual responsibilities—to educate students about intolerance and to maintain a productive learning environment—sometimes conflict with each other. The educational benefit of grappling with intolerance might not outweigh harmful effects that could compromise students' ability to learn. On a case-by-case basis, we determine a course of action that best serves our students.

WHAT IS HATEFUL SPEECH?

The principles that guide the school's decision-making are articulated well by John Palfrey, former Head of School at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts:

"The disruptive psychological toll of the most extreme, hateful speech is too high a price for members of marginalized groups on campus to be expected to pay—especially during this period of steady diversification and growing, but incomplete, equity and inclusion on campuses... The value in terms of teaching and learning of this sort of expression in the context of an academic community does not compensate for the distraction and harm caused to students. The fact that the harm and the distraction would fall disproportionately on a subset of students should factor into the analysis by educators. If schools are in fact about ensuring that a diverse group of young people have a place to learn, administrators should be able to choose whether the most hateful forms of speech have a place on campus." [2]

To serve our mission and to support diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, Riverdale is committed to facilitating discussions with students, parents, and faculty about hateful speech and the bounds of freedom of expression at Riverdale. When students learn about hateful speech and why people disagree about what's "okay" to say, they learn how and why people respond to language differently. Most important, they develop an eagerness to understand the experiences of people who are different from themselves. This disposition of wanting to understand someone else is crucial to "building character" and "creating community" (Mission Statement).

[2] John Palfrey, *Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces: Diversity and Free Expression in Education* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017), 102.

NEGOTIATING CONFLICT & CONTROVERSY

For many students, the experience of conflict is the most unsettling, difficult circumstance in which you encounter the reality of difference. All of Riverdale's efforts with respect to speech—to encourage freedom of expression and constructive discourse, to train students in reasoned argument, to examine the nature of hateful speech while also prohibiting it on campus—serve to prepare you for the reality of collective life: human beings disagree with one another, they often strive for incompatible ends, and they must constantly negotiate conflicts in their interpersonal relationships and larger social worlds.

Often, hateful speech is both a cause and a result of conflict. When two or more groups of people are in conflict because of specific grievances or controversies, hateful speech is used to dominate, demean, and abuse a party to the conflict in order to delegitimize their claim to a mutually satisfactory resolution. Perpetrators of hateful speech sometimes even invoke the concept of "freedom of speech" to protect their attempts to abuse a party to the conflict.

To fulfill the mission of the school, it is crucial for students to learn that arguments that challenge or threaten their interests or values are not necessarily hateful arguments. Conflict is not equivalent to hatred.

However, not all conflicts are corrupted by hateful speech. It is essential for you to understand that arguments that vigorously challenge the goals and/or values of an individual or group are not, by definition, "hate speech."

Sometimes, individuals and groups engaged in conflict use accusations of "hate speech" to prevent one another from expressing their views. To fulfill the mission of the school, it is crucial for students to learn that arguments that challenge or threaten their interests or values are not necessarily hateful arguments. Conflict is not equivalent to hatred. The school asks students, faculty, and parents to be willing to grapple with beliefs, arguments, and viewpoints that are the result of conflict between individuals and among groups of people. The school will not allow accusations of "hate speech" or invocations of "freedom of speech" to substitute for discussing and attempting to resolve conflicts.

We hope that, through our teaching and your experience of discourse on campus, you'll prize the right to speak freely just as much as your ability to foster genuine conversation.

We are committed to preparing you to negotiate conflict and to constructively respond to one another when you feel targeted by or accused of hateful speech. We want you to understand that complex controversies and conflicts—especially ones in which you are involved—demand careful investigation of context, details, and the perspectives of all parties. When you feel targeted by hatred or abuse, you should feel empowered to seek the intervention of the school. We will investigate and respond to the incident in accordance with our harassment policy. We also want you to be able to work through misunderstandings that happen every day. When you feel targeted by hateful speech, we want you to feel equipped to ask questions and pursue the conversation further in order to give your interlocutor a chance to clarify their point of view or recover from a mistake.

The burden to work through misunderstandings must not rest solely on the person who feels harmed. If you're told that your arguments seem hateful or abusive, you should seek to understand why and how your ideas appear hateful. Informed by what you learn, you should aim to communicate your ideas more accurately and/or respectfully. In some cases, you might even choose to reconsider your position on an issue. We want all students to understand that resorting to simple claims of "freedom of speech" or "hate speech" stifles the accumulation of knowledge that is essential to experiencing and negotiating conflict in constructive ways. To vigorously defend a perspective, one must be willing to explain the complexity of one's position and respond to questions. To negotiate a conflict rather than simply defeat an "opponent," one must aim to understand, accurately, other points of view.

The school will inevitably struggle and provoke disagreement in its attempt to distinguish between hateful speech and legitimate political speech. A belief or argument that appears hateful to one person or group might appear legitimate and reasonable to a different person or group. The school confronts this challenge with optimism and a sense of purpose. When the school deems it appropriate to investigate and respond to a specific situation, school leaders will exercise the same faculty of judgment that we seek to instill in you. We hope that you'll learn from these difficult situations and from your everyday lives on campus that intellectually rich, open discourse is not a right to which we are entitled. It is a collective achievement made possible by our relationships with one another. We hope that, through our teaching and your experience of discourse on campus, you'll prize the right to speak freely just as much as your ability to foster genuine conversation.

STANDARDS FOR REASONED ARGUMENT

To enable you "to change our world for the good," we teach you to recognize and avoid hateful and abusive speech. Most importantly, we teach you a model of discourse that you can emulate. We encourage you to be curious and courageous listeners, to demonstrate care for your interlocutors, and to reflect on why you choose to engage in conversation. You also learn how to construct and evaluate reasoned arguments, which is an especially crucial skill with respect to controversial topics and high-stakes conflicts. It can be difficult to differentiate reasoned argument from hateful and/or abusive speech, especially when arguments challenge, contradict, or scrutinize one's sense of self, one's personal or collective interests, or one's sincerely held beliefs.

At Riverdale, we expect adults and teach students to practice the following attributes of reasoned argument:

RESPECT FOR LOGICAL COHERENCE

The premises and conclusions of an argument are based on reasoned inferences rather than personal attacks, reductive generalizations, or contradictory ideas.

FIDELITY TO EVIDENCE

An argument is supported by comprehensive, detailed, accurate evidence; the argument does not rely on ignoring or distorting unfavorable evidence.

INTELLECTUAL RIGOR

Premises, conclusions, and evidence are precise, detailed, and thorough.

STANDARDS FOR REASONED ARGUMENT

HONESTY

The speaker does not lie by means of omission or fabrication about their argument, themselves, or their interlocutors; the speaker indicates whether the issue at stake was or is in serious dispute among scholars and other experts; the speaker offers an explanation for this disagreement; the speaker acknowledges whether their own view is generally contested or accepted by other scholars and experts; the speaker describes and responds to important arguments that diverge from their own; the speaker acknowledges the limits of their knowledge.

RESPONSIVENESS / INTELLECTUAL OPENNESS

The speaker invites questions and responses from the audience or discussion participants; before responding, the speaker asks clarifying questions and/or summarizes what they've heard in order to confirm that they understand the interlocutor; the speaker responds to the specific question and/or comment of the interlocutor; the speaker practices "consideration and respect for the feelings and well-being of others" by choosing not to interrupt, yell at, ridicule, mock, badger, or ignore their interlocutors; especially in the case of interactions between an adult speaker and a student, the adult is cognizant of the student's emotions and whether the discussion can continue in a constructive way; if the adult judges that a student is no longer benefiting from the conversation, the adult should invite (but not require) the student to continue the discussion at a later time or in a different context.

The final category of "responsiveness" shows that how we talk can't be separated from how we listen. Riverdale students need to be able to do more than use logic and evidence; they must learn that worthy discourse is only possible when interlocutors listen to one another and signal that they value one another's presence.

This description of reasoned argument and constructive conversation is what the school expects of all adults: administrators, faculty, staff, parents, and invited speakers. The school is responsible for teaching students how to create and express arguments that satisfy these expectations. When a student attempts to express an argument that others perceive as hateful or abusive, it is essential for the school to consider the nature and degree of the student's departure from the norms described above. Students who are learning to formulate and express reasoned arguments should not be punished or censured for failing to execute these norms at the level of mastery that we expect from adults. In some cases, however, the school will determine that a student should face consequences for egregious violations of these standards.

END OF DOCUMENT