



COMMUNITY

RIVERDALE

STATEMENT

ON CAMPUS

DISCOURSE



MIND



CHARACTER





“

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

”

FRANK S. HACKETT

FOUNDER OF RIVERDALE COUNTRY SCHOOL

INTRODUCTION

This statement is the product of work done by the teaching faculty at Riverdale Country School in collaboration with students, administrators, and trustees. It emanates from a need to state clearly how freedom of expression and open discourse empower us to fulfill Riverdale’s mission of developing minds, building character, and creating community.

For much of the history of the school, the principles and ideas we discuss here have been implicit in all that we do. In this statement, we seek to ensure that all members of our community understand and appreciate the assumptions that undergird the good work we do here.

DARIUS W. WEIL

HISTORY
DEPARTMENT

K. BLAIR PARKER

ASSISTANT HEAD OF
UPPER SCHOOL

DOMINIC A. A.

RANDOLPH
HEAD OF SCHOOL

The most critical points of this pamphlet for all community members to understand are:

1

As a school, our priority is to foster discourse that yields learning.

At Riverdale, students develop social, emotional, and intellectual skills that enable them to build relationships and collaborate in the service of learning.

2

Students grow in knowledge and character when they grapple with the reality of difference. In our diverse community, open discourse helps us cultivate empathy for one another and understand views that are different from our own.

3

Campus discourse thrives when everyone in our community feels a sense of belonging. 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.

4

Riverdale students learn that arguments that challenge or threaten their interests or values are not necessarily hateful arguments. The school welcomes legitimate political speech that might affirm or critique specific beliefs or actions and the activists, voters, and politicians who support those beliefs or actions.

5

Intellectually rich, open discourse is not a right; it is a collective achievement made possible by our relationships with one another.

6

By virtue of the education they receive here, Riverdale graduates should be able to investigate and understand beliefs that they do not hold, to critique and construct their own points of view, and to participate humanely and constructively in dialogue with others.



COMMUNITY

RIVERDALE IS A PRE-K THROUGH
GRADE 12 INDEPENDENT SCHOOL IN
NEW YORK CITY COMMITTED TO
EMPOWERING LIFELONG LEARNERS
BY DEVELOPING **MINDS**, BUILDING
CHARACTER, AND CREATING
COMMUNITY IN ORDER TO CHANGE
OUR WORLD FOR THE GOOD.



MIND

CHARACTER



FREEDOM

OF EXPRESSION &

OPEN DISCOURSE

At the core of Riverdale’s mission is an aspiration for students to “change our world for the good.” A better world—and a better school—is one in which people are able and eager to think for themselves and to learn from one another through open conversation.

As an institution dedicated to cultivating the intellect and character of young people, Riverdale teaches students that free, open discourse requires more than just willingness to say what’s on our minds. We also have to cultivate the conditions that make our conversation partners eager to speak freely in response to us. 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.

Every school year, we confront anew enduring questions: what kinds 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 type of open discourse that makes it worthwhile to show up for school?

TRUST, CARE,

& CURIOSITY

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.

At Riverdale, students learn to reflect on the reasons they enter into conversation and, through first-hand experience, they discover the value of discourse that yields learning. This discovery begins in Riverdale’s classrooms where teachers foster an ethos of care that encourages students to understand new perspectives and construct their own.

As students grow older, they discover that they can and ought to offer their peers the same gifts that Riverdale’s faculty have offered them: trust, care, and curiosity. When students treat one another as people whose ideas, emotions and questions matter to them, they see for themselves that the character of a conversation—its purpose, depth, and feel—is most often shaped by the relationships among the people doing the talking.

THE SKILLS OF

CONSTRUCTIVE

DISCOURSE

Riverdale is committed to teaching students the social, emotional, and intellectual skills needed to sustain constructive discourse. The most crucial lesson we teach students is how to listen. If people aim to have authentic, open exchange in which they can learn together, they need to demonstrate concern for one another by listening well. Listening is more than just being quiet to hear someone's words. To listen means to look for and notice how someone is responding emotionally and intellectually. Students learn to practice a range of actions that require careful listening:

**SHOW
GRATITUDE**

**WATCH YOUR
AIRTIME & DON'T
INTERRUPT**

**GIVE
INTELLECTUAL
SUPPORT**

**ACKNOWLEDGE
YOUR
CONFUSION**

**MAKE SPACE FOR
GRACE & REPAIR
MISTAKES**

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

**BE CURIOUS ABOUT
WHY SOMEONE
ISN'T SPEAKING**

**SEEK TO
UNDERSTAND
SOMEONE'S
IDEAS BY ASKING
QUESTIONS**

**OFFER EVIDENCE
FOR WHAT
YOU BELIEVE &
ACKNOWLEDGE
WHAT YOU
DON'T KNOW**

**NOTICE & RESPOND
TO PEOPLE'S
EMOTIONS
AS WELL AS THEIR
INTELLECTUAL
ARGUMENTS**

**EMBRACE
COMPLEXITY**

**PATIENTLY
ACCEPT A LACK
OF CLEAR-CUT
RESOLUTION**



COMMUNITY

WHEN STUDENTS MAKE THESE MOVES
IN A CONVERSATION, THEY DO MORE
THAN JUST SPEAK AND LISTEN: THEY
FULFILL THE ROLE OF A **FACILITATOR**,
SOMEONE WHO ELEVATES THE QUALITY
OF DISCOURSE. ULTIMATELY, WE WANT
STUDENTS TO FEEL RESPONSIBLE
FOR FACILITATING CONVERSATION,
NOT JUST ADDING TO IT.



MIND

CHARACTER



DISCOURSE &

BELONGING

Students know from their 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. Discourse on campus should reflect and help realize the ideals of our school.

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

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.

Often, people resort to hateful speech in situations 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.

At Riverdale, we are committed to preparing students to negotiate conflict in constructive ways. Students learn to avoid hateful speech that disparages the personhood of a group of people or suggests that certain characteristics render them permanently unworthy of dignity and respect. Students also learn that not all

expressions of dislike or disapproval are based on an individual or group's identity. The school welcomes legitimate political speech that might challenge a group's conduct and/or beliefs. To become responsible citizens, students can and should express affirmation or disapproval of specific agendas and the activists, voters, and politicians who support these agendas.

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.

THE SCHOOL'S RESPONSIBILITIES CONCERNING 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.

Ultimately, we aim for students themselves to foster a school community in which everyone feels a sense of belonging. When students extend this type of care to one another, they empower themselves to learn deeply through free, open conversation.

CONCLUSION

At Riverdale, we prize the right to speak freely as much as the ability to foster genuine conversation.

By virtue of the education they receive here, Riverdale graduates should be able to investigate and understand beliefs that they do not hold, to critique and construct their own points of view, and to participate humanely and constructively in dialogue with others.

We believe that the intellectual growth of our students is tightly linked to their growth as ethical human beings. We ask of them—and ourselves—more than rigorous argumentation and independent thinking. We ask that we care for one another and that we collaborate in the service of learning.





COMMUNITY



MIND



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CHARACTER

