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Sample Guidelines on Civic Engagement and the School Environment

Civic engagement is defined as “individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern. Civic engagement can take many forms, from individual volunteerism to organizational involvement to electoral participation.”

(<https://www.apa.org/education/undergrad/civic-engagement>)

“Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.” (*Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*, edited by Thomas Ehrlich, published by Oryx Press, 2000.)

“A morally and civically responsible individual recognizes himself or herself as a member of a larger social fabric and therefore considers social problems to be at least partly his or her own; such an individual is willing to see the moral and civic dimensions of issues, to make and justify informed moral and civic judgments, and to take action when appropriate.” (*Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*, edited by Thomas Ehrlich, published by Oryx Press, 2000.)

Our school values civic engagement and respects the diversity of thoughts, opinions, and experiences that exist within our school community. We encourage our students to be knowledgeable about current events and key issues happening around the world. We offer space to be informed and reflective on these matters, and we encourage inquiry-based and dialogue-based explorations into multiple perspectives. As our students actively engage in political and social issues, on our campus we do so with the following norms:

- Speak from the “I” perspective. Be authentic.
- The only assumption we should make is the assumption of positive intent.
- Challenge yourself and others with grace aimed at clarity.
- Listen to understand, not to judge.
- Disagreement is a learning opportunity.
- Lean into discomfort.
- Practice your capacity to honor multiple perspectives.
- As we remain impassioned, also remain respectful and civil.
- The conversation is on-going

(These norms are used with credit to the NAIS Student Diversity Leadership Conference and the The Glasgow Group’s National Diversity Practitioners Institute).



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These norms help us to navigate difficult conversations and situations about complicated political and social matters. As we engage civically, we also engage civilly, refraining from expressions and/or actions that devalue, demean, and dehumanize others as that violates the norms, expectations, and rules of our community.

Civic engagement allows our students to develop and practice key skills for leadership and life-long learning. The major skills associated with civic engagement include:

- active listening
- deep reflection and analytical thought
- organization of thought considering evidence and counter-evidence
- research and data interpretation skills
- creative problem-solving and human-centered design
- effective communication skills
- ability to see, understand, and hold multiple perspectives

At our school, civic engagement occurs in many forms. It could be an advisory discussion, classroom discussion, open forum, or assembly around a social or political topic. It could be a service learning trip, an assembly that raises awareness, or a fundraiser that generates resources for a certain cause. Engagement in local and national elections and legislation, responding to natural disasters and civil unrest, educating about and advocating against discrimination, inequity, and lack of access to resources, and grappling with issues of human and civil rights are all examples of civic engagement that we might see on our campus.

As we practice civic engagement, we ask that our students and employees are mindful about clothing, stickers, buttons, and other such items with political or social messages on their persons or in their personal spaces such as lockers, classrooms, offices, laptops and backpacks, etc. There is a line between advocating and offending which must be vetted situationally. For example, wearing a campaign t-shirt that supports your preferred candidate is ok, as long as the messaging on the t-shirt does not include material deemed offensive or demeaning to others. Employees should be mindful about the expression of their own views on campus and on social media - careful to speak in their own voice as opposed to speaking for the school and with an understanding that the expression of personal views could compromise the learning or working environment of those who do not hold those views. Students and employees may be asked to remove items that they have on campus or on social media which are outside of the norms and guidelines of civic engagement at our school and may be held accountable in other ways according to our student and employee handbooks. The promotion of messages, symbols, or images that violate our mission statement and/or Diversity Statement are prohibited. As we hold our community members accountable in these ways, so do we hold guest speakers and presenters accountable to our community's norms and expectations. Speakers should be vetted in advance for their understanding of and agreement to these



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guidelines; guest speakers and presenters join us with an understanding that their views are independent of the school and are presented for our community's education, not an endorsement.

An election cycle, especially a Presidential election, provides clear opportunities for civic engagement. Our school appreciates the learning that can happen as we explore and vet candidates, platforms, and key issues in an election. During an election cycle, we may engage in debates and/or mock elections as long as the focus remains on the issues and does not devolve into a mocking or personal attack on candidates or other individuals. Especially during an election cycle, we ask that students and employees are mindful about and adhere to the aforementioned guidelines.

In the practice of civic engagement, there may be times when students would like to hold political or social demonstrations on campus, such as a protest, walk-out, poster or t-shirt campaign, the wearing of ribbons to raise awareness, etc. To ensure alignment with our guidelines on civic engagement, students should speak with their division head and/or the Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion before proceeding with such demonstrations on campus.

At our school, we see civic engagement as an element of a quality education. Diego Duran-Medina says in his article in the Winter 2017 issue of Independent School magazine,

"Teaching the new skills for global citizenship requires consideration of three related, yet distinct, spheres: civic engagement, research skills, and social media...Where is the space for students to develop the intellectual and emotional skills to exercise what it means to become a competent and engaged global citizen in school and beyond? Such an education is not only about teaching citizen responsibilities and rights but also about helping each student develop the actual ability to use his or her voice to spur action and to speak on an issue. It is about helping students move from the *what* to the *why* and from the effects of a problem to the root causes."

(<https://www.nais.org/magazine/independent-school/winter-2017/scholars-and-citizens/>)

Civic engagement is one of the many ways that we live our school's mission and values and prepare our students for transformative leadership.