



Creating and Guiding Opportunities for Civil Discourse in K-12 Classrooms

By Lauren Calig

“Where wise actions are the fruit of life, wise discourse is the pollination.”

– Bryant H. McGill

Every year, a different idea becomes the new shiny penny in our schools. As educators, we are at risk of becoming skeptical, even jaded. We throw ourselves into the next new thing. We have been trained to think that new ideas are temporary, lasting only a year or two. If we are lucky, maybe we can get five years out of a practice.

Though some methods seem temporary, the importance of learning to participate in civil discourse is anything but fleeting. Retired National Public Radio talk show host Diane Rehm defined the skill as “our ability to have conversations about topics about which we disagree, and our ability to listen to each other’s perspectives.” It is a skill that when used effectively will enable students to be citizens of our global world.

By starting the practice of civil discourse with our youngest learners, we are teaching them how to respectfully disagree. We are also teaching them there is value in another’s point of view and that we can learn and grow from viewpoints different from our own.

Laurel School, an all-girls school in northeast Ohio, uses an evidence-based approach to education called “Responsive Classroom.” This approach focuses on the relationship between academic success and social-emotional learning. What can children do to be fair? What is good listening? Why is understanding how each person feels important? How can an early intervention with civil discourse prompt and help children grow into better humans?

Laurel’s primary division — kindergarten through fourth grade — follows the Responsive Classroom model. Students assemble every morning for a community greeting and a question-sharing session. They are urged to be thoughtful and deliberate in their answers, and if not ready to speak, they can pass. The girls have the opportunity to appreciate other voices while being able to respectfully disagree with one another.

Pre-primary and primary Laurel classes learn civil discourse through monthly Civility Conversations. Laurel uses key texts to guide discourse, including:

- *Roots and Wings* (York)
- *Anti-Bias Education in Early Childhood Classrooms* (Kissinger)
- *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (Delpit)

The open dialogue and questioning during the lessons cover issues including social identity, race, racism, ethnicity, gender, ableism, religion, socioeconomics, human rights,



Lauren Calig instructs a class at Laurel School. (Photo courtesy Laurel School)

social justice, and family structure. Participants discover the way to learn is by asking respectfully.

Laurel also uses safe spaces for engaging in civil discourse where students select the topics and follow respectful discussion guidelines. These discussions — called Common Ground — are optional, open to all middle and upper school students, and are scheduled around a meal. Students anonymously suggest topics for the discourse that takes place in Common Ground.

Laurel School’s Center for Research on Girls (LCRG) puts research to work by integrating the best available information into the curriculum.

LCRG’s most recent research brief, “Engaging in Civil Discourse,” identifies six key, teachable building blocks of civil discourse. These are divided into the emotional skills of extending empathy, accepting discomfort, and braving controversy and the cognitive skills of cultivating curiosity, taking perspective, and engaging effectively.

Using these, we practice what we preach. We teach what is necessary for molding girls into compassionate human beings who will go out into the world knowing how to engage in civil discourse. ■

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