

Executive Summary:

Thriving in a World of Pluralistic Contention: A Framework for Schools

In the United States' current polarized social and political climate, educational institutions—including independent secondary schools—are becoming the venue for increased community conflict. The challenges facing schools today include increasing litigation in areas of admission, curriculum, student behavior, and more; loss of public confidence in the ability of teachers to provide instruction on sensitive or controversial topics; and hostile attacks from parent groups and lawmakers, among others.

These trends raise important questions about the future of schooling in America, including what the role of schools should be in political and social affairs, how that role is expressed in the classroom, and how to create school climates that foster open, nonpartisan, and courageous inquiry.

With these questions in mind, Deerfield Academy Head of School Dr. John Austin, with funding from an E.E. Ford Foundation grant, convened a group of renowned independent school leaders from around the country to develop a framework for enhancing the expressive freedom of students, fostering in them habits of curiosity and critical analysis, and preparing them to thrive in a world of pluralistic contention.

The Framework lays out three pillars of academic pluralism based on a tradition of 20th century documents developed by colleges and universities, including among others the American Association of University Professors' *1915 Declaration of Principles*, the University of Chicago's *1967 Kalven Report*, and Yale University's *Woodward Report*.

The three pillars are expressive freedom, disciplined nonpartisanship, and intellectual diversity. These mutually reinforcing pillars support the central goal of the Framework: to form students as “distinct thinking individuals” skilled in the habits of independent thought, conversant with the norms of disciplined inquiry, and empowered to discover, develop, and courageously express their own political and civic commitments.

Regarding expressive freedom, the Framework outlines goals such as fostering in young people the ability to respond to views that seem unreasonable and upsetting, creating a climate where intellectual risk-taking is cherished and supported, and encouraging the broadest possible range of speech among students.

The disciplined nonpartisanship pillar lays out guidelines to limit stance-taking by school leaders and promote discretion by faculty when expressing their own views and beliefs in the classroom.

The third pillar demonstrates how schools can foster intellectual diversity by exposing students to a wide range of ideas and debates within the formal school curriculum. The goal of intellectual diversity is to include competing arguments that will encourage students to be rigorous in their analysis, generous in their attention, and ultimately, to reach their own conclusions.

The hope is that the Framework will facilitate the sharing of effective practices related to the Three Pillars. If academic pluralism is to take full hold in schools, then teachers, school leaders, trustees, and parents will need to collaborate to advance it.

Boards can utilize the Framework to assess school mission and clarify priorities; schools can use it to educate parents about the value of intellectual diversity, expressive freedom, and stance-taking, and as a guide to providing transparency in the publication of curriculum and instructional standards.

The Framework contends that academic pluralism is an essential means for promoting independent thought and courageous inquiry, which can significantly enhance the academic experience and create a new generation of independent thinkers and leaders.