

To: Dr. Paul Sally, Superintendent  
Board of Education, New Trier Township High School

From: Dr. Peter W. Tragos, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction

Re: Creating Civil Civic Spaces: New Trier's Civil Discourse & Critical Thinking Statement in Practice

Date: October 11, 2024

## Overview

Since adopting the *Civil Discourse and Critical Thinking* statement in October 2020, the principles of the statement have guided instructional practices and shaped the classroom environment. Given the urgent matters of COVID during the 2020-2021 school year, the work on operationalizing the statement began in earnest the following 2021-2022 school year.

That year, to inform the Board and community about how we teach civil discourse and critical thinking in our classrooms, three departments presented how they develop the skills and dispositions related to civil discourse through relationships, curriculum, and instructional approaches as part of a Teaching & Learning Series. The February 2022 Institute Day theme was "Civil Discourse and Critical Thinking in Principle and Practice." It was dedicated to building an understanding of the statement itself and offered professional development sessions for teachers to learn new classroom strategies to foster civil discourse. It featured a keynote conversation with Dr. Molly Scudder, discussing her book, [Beyond Empathy and Inclusion: The Challenge of Listening in Democratic Deliberation](#).

The following year, in 2022-2023, Civil Discourse and Critical Thinking was a key strategic objective in the Annual Plan. We built upon the momentum of the previous school year, and the Social Studies department provided ongoing professional development for their colleagues to make the principles of the statement more tangible and visible to students. Additionally, as we hire a new generation of teachers, the New Teacher Induction program adjusted its curriculum to align more closely with the Strategic Plan and the needs of new teachers, and civil discourse and critical thinking became the thematic focus for third-year induction.

Most recently, as part of our Professional Learning Collaborative (PLC) model, teachers have come together in a PLC titled "Dynamic Discussions: Promoting Critical Thinking and Active Listening Through Civil Discourse." Forty teachers have participated in this PLC over the past two years. Additionally, the Social Studies department continues to lead this work, first and foremost, by developing their understanding and skills in civil discourse. They have created a set of instructional strategies and dispositions to foster what they call "civil civic classrooms." With 98% of students taking a social studies class, the impact of their work is a defining feature of New Trier's social studies experience. The department is also leading a professional development workshop this month titled

"Decision 2024: Creating Civil Civic Spaces," which is open to all teachers to build their skills and confidence in preparing for discussion around the current presidential election. They also presented this workshop to all 160 advisers.

Overall, this work continues to be a strategic initiative for the district, and faculty members are engaged in their development while also creating learning environments where civil discourse and critical thinking are the norm.

### **The Imperative for Civil Discourse and Civics Education**

Political polarization is at an all-time high, and everything about politics seems zero-sum. Dislike and distrust for the “other side” is growing. According to research from More in Common, Americans have deeply distorted views of each other - what they call a “perception gap” that only fuels division. And the consensus is that it is tearing us apart.

The call for depolarization comes from reasonable people across all sectors of society. The antidote to such antipathy is a more robust civics education. Calls for more robust civics education and learning environments characterized by civil discourse and inquiry is a conversation among K-12 and postsecondary education leaders and the public and private sector. In the past several years, dozens of organizations like Citizen University, Braver Angels, More in Common, Better Arguments Project, Constructive Dialogue Institute, Open Dialogue, Local Civics, and New Pluralists, among several others, all committed to the work of depolarization and civic repair have emerged.

Citizenship skills and dispositions like civil discourse and critical thinking are essential future-ready skills. As such, schools are the best place -- perhaps the only place -- for the development of these skills. The State of Illinois took a first step by mandating civics as a graduation requirement in 2017. New Trier took it further by developing a robust and relevant civics education curriculum grounded less in the content of civics and more in skills that prepare students to live in a diverse democracy.

### **Presentation Preview**

At Monday's Board of Education meeting, as part of the Culture, Climate, Equity, and Belonging presentation, four Social Studies department members will present their work around civil discourse within the department, in their classrooms, and across the school. The presentation is guided by two big questions on the importance of social studies education right now and what it means to prepare students to thrive in a diverse democracy. They will share how they have developed their skills and dispositions and then illustrate how employing these strategies creates a greater sense of belonging for all students.