

In The Classroom:

The Trial of Officer Van Dyke

Classroom Instruction Guidance and Resources

“The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education.” Martin Luther King Jr

In Chicago Public Schools, educators are encouraged to facilitate student learning opportunities that foster critical thinking and deliberation about political issues from multiple perspectives; promote the sharing of students opinions, values and questions in a supportive environment; and allow time for students to reflect and identify next steps for the community. The trial of Chicago Police Officer Jason Van Dyke, who is charged with the murder of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald in 2014, will likely evoke both interest and discussion from our students. As such, it is critical that educators are prepared and provide space for students should they and their students choose to engage in this critical and timely public issue.

As educators and trusted adults in our students' lives, we are in a unique position to help them understand and process feelings they may have about the shooting of Laquan McDonald, Officer Van Dyke's trial, and the relationship between law enforcement and the community. Yet, bringing controversial current events into the classroom is challenging — especially when we may have our own opinions, perspectives, and feelings and must remain neutral.* It is important to first consider your students, their potential personal and community connections to this case or similar cases, and the complexities involved in the relationship between community members and law enforcement both in Chicago and around our country.

While this guidance was created to support all teachers, the decision to use it must first be informed by the teachers' knowledge of their students and their own readiness to support student exploration of this issue. This is an opportunity to respond to students, connect classroom learning, strengthen relationships, and make space for students to share their questions, perspectives, and emotions. Our students experience the world every day, and we have the privilege of helping them build the skills to discuss, evaluate, understand, and engage in their world in a meaningful way.

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** Teachers do not have the constitutional right to introduce their own political views to students, “but must stick to the prescribed curriculum.” Mayer v. Monroe County Cmty. Sch. Corp. (7th Cir. 2007).

1.) Prioritize Time for Teachers to Prepare for Difficult Conversations

Teachers and staff should make time to discuss the issue, their students, and the impact on the community before preparing for a discussion with students. The following are questions and resources to support team preparation:

Consider students and community:

- How has the the death of Laquan McDonald and the trial of Officer Van Dyke impacted our students and our community?
- What are the teachable moments that this controversy offers our students?
- How will we communicate with family and community as we embark upon these discussions with students?
- Are there any takeaways gleaned from this process that we might want to elevate for future development? How can we continue to build student skills, knowledge and dispositions for discussing controversial public issues?

READ and LEARN TOGETHER. When preparing with colleagues, consider using texts like:

- [Teaching Controversy, Civil Discourse in the Classroom](#): by Teaching Tolerance
- [Why We Need Controversy in the Classroom](#)
- [How Teens Want You To Teach #BlackLivesMatter](#)
- [The Case for Contentious Curricula](#)
- [The Political Classroom: How Much is Too Much](#)

CONSIDER ORGANIZING AN ETHICAL DILEMMA DELIBERATION: [Harvard's Justice In Schools](#) has a variety of case studies and protocols used to deliberate ethical dilemmas in education with school staff, and develop understanding and shared agreements in supporting students through controversies. Consider:

- [Controversial Issues Teaching](#)
- [Balancing Inclusivity and Free Speech](#)

2.) Consider Students' Social Emotional Needs

We cannot overemphasize the emotional impact that this topic and discussion might have on your students, thus requiring very intentional and thoughtful planning. In some cases, students' emotional responses may manifest as inattention, irritability or defiance. School staff should be aware of signs of trauma or distress, and refer students as necessary for additional supports through the school's Behavioral Health Team/MTSS team or counselor/clinician. See [SEL and Mental Health resources](#) for additional resources. The [CPS Knowledge Center](#) provides resources on developing respect and rapport in the classroom.

Restorative Circles

Restorative Circles are one way to provide a structured outlet for students (and staff) to express and process their emotions. Circles can be held in the classroom or another safe space but should always be facilitated by trained Circle Keepers with planned introduction, questions, and closing. It is important to remember that while circle facilitators are equal participants, educators have a responsibility to refrain from introducing their own political views. See [Restorative Practices in the Classroom](#)

[The CPS Restorative Practices Guide and Toolkit](#) provides additional how-to resources for conducting restorative processes in your school. If your school is in need of immediate support or would like additional information, please contact your [Network SEL Specialist](#) or Ben McKay at bmmckay@cps.edu.

3.) Getting Started with Students: Make Space to Process and Reflect

Dealing with sensitive issues takes careful planning and consideration. Consider your students, their potential personal and community connections to this case or similar cases, and the complexities involved in the relationship between community members and law enforcement both in Chicago and around our country.

We suggest the following steps and resources as a starting point with students:

First, DEVELOP SHARED AGREEMENTS for how the class will engage in conversations about controversial issues. While there's not one "right way" to establish shared agreements, here are a few suggestions for establishing ground rules that will encourage equity of voice, honest reflection, and respectful discourse throughout the discussion.

Example: Ask students to describe what a productive and supportive discussion looks like, sounds like, and feels like, and write these descriptions on the board. Then, ask students to identify agreements that everyone can make to help everyone work to ensure that the discussion lives up to that criteria. Refer to [The Restorative Practices Handbook](#) for additional ideas.

Next, make space for students to process their emotions, reactions, and questions through a [Talking Circle](#). Consider using the following questions:

- a. What does this case and the outcome mean to you? (To us? To our city?)
- b. What is valuable about your perspective as a young person in Chicago, and who would benefit from learning about your perspective?
- c. Whose perspective do you need to learn more about and why?
- d. What have we learned, and what do we need to take with us in order to inform the future of our city?
- e. What remaining questions do you still have?

Need more support? Here are some resources and models to support you in facilitating civil conversations with students:

- [Facing History and Ourselves - Civil Conversations](#)
- [Teaching Tolerance Guide on Discussing Race, Racism and Difficult Topics](#)
- [Let's Talk](#) outlines K-12 strategies for having difficult conversations with students.
- [Managing Strong Emotional Reactions](#)

4.) Dig Deeper: Discuss and Deliberate

Important note on the teacher's role: We encourage schools and teachers to provide safe and welcoming spaces for students to share their views. As is best practice for preparation of any good discussion, teachers should serve as facilitators, ensuring a safe environment for exploring multiple viewpoints. Teacher-facilitators support students in arriving at informed viewpoints after careful consideration of a variety of sources and perspectives. In preparing for a discussion on the trial and surrounding issues, teachers should:

- Provide resources and scaffold instruction so that students learn the background they need in order to participate;
- Provide materials that students can understand and are aimed at helping students grapple with a “fair-hearing” of multiple points of view;
- Determine form or method of discussion and ensure that the materials are appropriate for that method of discussion;
- Pre-teach some skills that students will need to use in the discussion, as appropriate; and
- Determine how to assess what students have learned and share the assessment and criteria with students.

Deciding to Dig Deeper: An introductory discussion of the issue might generate further interest in exploring both the case itself and its connection to students' lives and communities. If you choose to continue study of this issue with your students, we've outlined some framing questions and resources as a starting point.

Note, the sequence of questions reflects best practices in facilitating discussion of controversial issues: students understand facts; consider perspectives; deliberate issues; draw conclusions; consider what comes next.

A. What are the facts and background of the case? Before discussion, ensure students understand the timeline of events and figures in the case:

- [A complete guide to the Laquan McDonald shooting and the Jason Van Dyke trial](#) - Chicago Sun Times
- [A timeline of the Chicago police shooting of Laquan McDonald](#) - Associated Press
- [Breaking Down the Van Dyke Trial: Possible Outcomes](#) - ABC 7

B. What considerations does a jury have to make when deciding if police are justified in using lethal force? Consider Illinois' deadly force law and how it factors into the case:

- [Illinois' law on deadly force crucial to Jason Van Dyke's defense](#) - Chicago Sun Times
- [Introduction to Trial by Jury](#) - Constitutional Rights Foundation, Chicago
- [Will the '21 Foot' Defense Work?](#) The Marshall Project
- [Prosecutors Rest Case After Expert Testifies](#) - Chicago Tribune

C. What are some of the investigations, policy recommendations, and reform outcomes since October 20th, 2014?

- Department of Justice, [Chicago Police Department Investigation Report](#)
- [What the Investigation Into the Chicago Police Department Found](#) - Atlantic
- [Chicago Police Consent Decree](#)

D. What does the trial and its outcome mean for Chicago? What do we need to consider and do next? Afford space for students to consider multiple perspectives and deliberate to achieve shared understanding:

- [Why Chicago Is Closely Watching the Trial of Officer Van Dyke](#) - NY Times
- [When it comes to Laquan McDonald vs. Jason Van Dyke, most of us have chosen a team](#) - Dahleen Glanton, Chicago Tribune Columnist
- [What the Trial Means for the Future of Chicago](#) - The New Yorker

E. How do we move forward? What are the ways we can improve? How do we rebuild trust? After deliberation, help students consider the issue in relation to their own lived experience and what they ultimately want for the future of our City.

- See [Part 6: Moving Forward: Strategies for Building Positive Police Community Relations](#) in the CPS Reparations Won Curriculum
- What organizations in your community, and in Chicago, are working to improve policing and police community relations? What can we learn from them?
- What do you think needs to be done? How can you advocate? Where and when can you participate?

Project Extension: If students are invested and choose to continue the learning, help them to consider how they can use their voice, lived experience, and expertise to extend through civic engagement:

- What might students do with the knowledge and perspective they have acquired?
- How can they continue to learn? Who in your community can talk to students about the work already being done to improve police and community relations?
- Who outside of the school might benefit from their perspective and expertise?

5.) After the Trial: Reflection and Next Steps

During this emotional and controversial time, we want to acknowledge and support the responsibility and opportunity we have before us. As educators and trusted adults in our students lives, we are in a unique position to help them understand and process feelings they may have about the trial.

Below are suggestions for how you might frame discussion that encourages students to reflect and continue to learn about issues, consider how history can inform their understanding of present day events, and decide if and how they might engage civically.

When discussing issues with students we must plan thoughtfully. Please refer back to pages 2-4 for guidance on classroom community and civil conversations.

1.) What does Laquan McDonald's death and Officer Van Dyke's trial mean to me and for me? Reflect on student knowledge and individual perspective in order to develop shared understanding

- a.) Why do you think the jury came to this decision?
- b.) How did you form this opinion? What factors shaped your opinion?
- c.) What information did you find useful or not useful in forming your opinion?
- d.) How do you feel about the verdict?
- e.) How does your identity and lived experiences influence how you see this trial and verdict?
- f.) What other perspectives might you still need to learn more about and consider?
- g.) Is there anything you still need to know? Where might we go for answers?
- h.) How can we continue to support one another when strong feelings about these issues come up again once this conversation is over?

2.) What's next? What should we do with our knowledge and perspective? What might we do with our ideas for improving the health and wellness of our city? Help students move toward taking informed action by facilitating a reflection to action discussion:

- a.) How are others choosing to engage in discussion or collective action on this issue?
- b.) How can we continue the conversation with others?
- c.) What can we learn about our city from this case and verdict?
- d.) What have we learned about ourselves through the exploration of this case?
- e.) Moving forward, what are some ways you might respond if someone expresses an opinion about this issue that you disagree with?
- f.) How might we work to improve the relationship between the African American community and CPD?