

Responding to the Trial of Officer Van Dyke:

A Guide for Supporting Student Engagement

[“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](#)

The trial of Chicago Police Officer Jason Van Dyke, who was charged with the murder of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald in 2014, began earlier this month. Our students are informed and engaged members of our city, and we expect that they will want to discuss the trial and the socio-political issues connected to the trial. Schools must be equipped to support students through controversies that impact their lives and make room in the classroom to share emotions, experiences, perspectives, and engage in meaningful inquiry.

It is our job as educators to help our students find ways to engage in discussion of controversial and emotionally-charged topics safely and productively while maximizing their time in the classroom.

In this document, you will find guidance and resources for supporting, managing, and reflecting on student civil discourse and civic engagement at your school.

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1.) Prioritize Time for Teachers and Teams to Prepare for Difficult Conversations:

It is incredibly important for teachers and staff to process and discuss the issue with colleagues in addition to thinking about your students, and the impact on your community before preparing for a discussion with students. The following are examples of questions and processes to help facilitate discussions with teams, in no particular order:

Reflection and Connection to Instruction:

- How does this conversation find you today? What are you thinking about or feeling about the trial?
- How has the the death of Laquan McDonald and the trial of Officer Van Dyke impacted our students and our community?
- Reflect on the students and their responses, questions, and actions thus far. What have we learned? What new insights did we gain about our students — who they are, what they care about, and what challenges they face?
- How do teachers create space in their classrooms for discussion and deliberation of controversial issues? What are the best practices? What are our needs?
- What are the teachable moments that this controversy offers our students?
- Are there any takeaways gleaned from this process that we might want to elevate for future growth?

We suggest **READING and LEARNING TOGETHER**. Consider using texts like:

- [Teaching Controversy, Civil Discourse in the Classroom](#): by Teaching Tolerance
- [YouthRadio.org DIY Toolkit: How Teens Want You to Teach #Blacklivesmatter](#)

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](#)

After the Trial, Reflect: It is important to reflect on how your school and teaching teams work together to respond and support students. We encourage you to reflect on your work before, during, and after the controversy.

1. What messages did our actions and decisions send to students?
2. How well do we know our students? Do they feel our support?
3. How will we continue to support and engage with our students moving forward?
4. What did our actions and communications teach students about political and civic participation?

5. How can we build capacity for civic discourse and engagement by making it a core practice to discuss and deliberate with students?

2.) Cultivate a Classroom Environment for Controversial Discussion

Are there restrictions teachers and staff should know about as they respond to students and plan instruction on the trial outcomes?

Educators must remember that we hold a special position of power when it comes to our students. As teachers, we must be especially thoughtful when we decide whether and how to discuss controversial and political issues with students who may not share the same points of view. 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). However, it is important that students have the opportunity to consider, analyze, and discuss current and important issues in society. Teachers are encouraged to facilitate student-learning opportunities that foster critical thinking and deliberation about political issues from multiple perspectives; promote the sharing of student opinions, values and questions in a supportive environment; and allow time for students to reflect and identify next steps for the community.

How do we create space for students to learn about and discuss controversial issues, and respond to students who react emotionally?

We encourage schools and teachers to provide safe and welcoming spaces for students to share their views. Students may have strong emotions related to the trial, and teachers and other staff should model and help them express their feelings in civil and productive ways. Some schools may consider providing additional supports, such as a designated room with support staff who can guide students through processing their emotions. Students who need additional support should be referred to the school counselor, social worker, and/or behavioral health team.

The [CPS Knowledge Center](#) provides resources on developing respect and rapport in the classroom.

3.) Classroom Discussion on Sensitive and Controversial Issues

Below are some resources for holding classroom-based discussions of sensitive and potentially controversial issues. *See **In The Classroom: Laquan McDonald Shooting and Officer Van Dyke Trial Classroom Instructional Guidance Document** for more instructional support, ideas, and resources for teaching this controversy.

- [Handbook for facilitating difficult conversations in the classroom](#)
- Facing History and Ourselves: [Fostering Civil Discourse: A Guide for Classroom Conversations](#)
- [Managing Strong Emotional Reactions](#)
- [Teaching Tolerance Guide on Discussing Race, Racism and Difficult Topics](#)

Evidence-based rationale for teaching controversies in the classroom:

- [Politics in the Classroom: How Much is Too Much](#)
- [The Case for Contentious Curricula](#)

4.) Social & Emotional Considerations

Students may respond in a variety of ways to the emotional and political discourse that may arise during the trial. These emotions might include fear, anxiety, sadness, anger, and desensitization. These and other feelings may especially be present for students who have been exposed to or have experienced trauma. Schools can help *all* students understand and process their emotions by ensuring [safe, supportive school climates](#) with consistent routines and building positive adult-student relationships. Classroom discussions around the impact of a shooting and civic actions are also important opportunities to build students' [social and emotional competencies](#) and create non-judgmental spaces for students to express their emotions.

Additionally, teachers may want to consider having regular check-ins with students they suspect may be triggered by the events in the media and/or have a history of exposure to traumatic events. Check-ins should include discussing the student's current emotional state and coping skills they can utilize when upset, distressed, or anxious.

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.

5.) Mental Health and Wellness

What community and mental health resources are available for students and families?

Chicago Resource Guide

- [Mental Health Association of Greater Chicago](#)
Phone: (800) 209-8114
310 S. Peoria Street, Suite 404, Chicago, IL 60607
- [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#)
Phone: (312) 563-00445
Address: 1536 W Chicago Ave. Chicago, IL
- [SASS/CARES Hotline \(for students in crisis and a danger to self or others\)](#)
Phone: (800) 345-9049
- [Suicide Prevention Hotline](#)
Phone: (800) 273-TALK

What self-care resources are available to staff?

- [Basic self care strategies](#) to function well and be ready for life's challenges.
- [A Guide to Managing Stress in Crisis Response Professions](#): A thorough manual that includes understanding the stress cycle, managing stress, promoting a positive workplace environment, and self-care for Crisis Response Professionals.
- [Self-Care Plan and Checklist](#): A worksheet to journal personal strategies for self-care.

Don't be afraid to seek professional help if these strategies are not effective, or if your symptoms are prolonged and impact your daily functioning. You can reach out to the Employee Assistance Program that is available for CPS employees. This service is free and confidential, and counselors are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. They can be reached at 1-800-424-4776.

Who can I go to for additional information or resources at CPS?

Social and Emotional Learning Supports	Network SEL Specialists, Office of Social & Emotional Learning	Network SEL Specialists contact list 773-553-1830
Resources and Supports for Counselors	Whitney Triplett, HS Counseling Specialist	wdtriplett@cps.edu
Resources for classroom and school social emotional learning	CPS Office of Social Emotional Learning	OSEL Email List
Resources for classroom instruction and support for student civic engagement	Heather Van Benthuyzen, Director of Social Science and Civic Engagement, Office of Teaching and Learning	hvanbenthuyzen@cps.edu 773-553-6391
Questions about First Amendment rights of staff and students	Lee Lowder, Deputy General Counsel, Law Department	lalowder@cps.edu 773-553-5955

6.) Communication to Parents and Students

Dear [SCHOOL NAME] Parents and Families,

As the trial of Chicago Police Officer Jason Van Dyke nears completion, we will take every appropriate precaution to ensure the safety of our entire school community. Your child's safety is our top priority and the city has a multi-agency interdisciplinary plan in place to ensure that Chicagoans can express themselves peacefully about the verdict.

We have also been working with the Office of Safety and Security to review our school's safety plans should we need to utilize them.

We also expect that students will want to discuss the issues connected to the trial. We value student voice and believe that it is important for students to have opportunities to share their perspectives and engage in meaningful inquiry with their peers. Our educators hold a special position in the classroom and will create a safe space for students to consider, analyze, and discuss the trial. They will ensure that sensitive issues and different points of view are handled with a high level of professionalism and thoughtfulness to support students through the discussion.

I recognize that you may have questions or concerns about how we plan to discuss the trial. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

[Principal]

7.) Planning an Effective Disciplinary Response to Behavior Incidents

Schools should consider the most effective and appropriate response to any behavior incidents. An effective disciplinary response includes a restorative approach; maintains a safe, productive learning environment; teaches lifelong social and emotional skills; and repairs the harm done. See [Guidelines for Effective Discipline](#) or reach out to the [Network SEL specialists](#) for additional support.

Restorative Consequences

In all cases, behavior incidents provide a critical learning opportunity for students to reflect on the experience, understand the impact (both positive and negative) of their actions, and identify next steps that need to be taken to repair harm or restore the community.

A restorative approach to discipline ensures that students are held accountable by acknowledging responsibility for their actions and problem solving to achieve a meaningful and mutually-agreed upon restitution or outcome. Restorative Practices involve all participants to practice empathetic listening, discuss their feelings and perspectives, identify what happened, describe how it affected everyone, and find solutions to make things better.

Schools may choose to engage students in restorative conversations and/or circles to reflect on their experience and its impact, using restorative questions such as:

- What were you thinking and feeling at the time?
- What have you thought about or felt since?
- Who has been affected by the trial? In what way?
- (If harm is identified) What do you think needs to happen to make things right?
- (If harm is identified) How can we make sure that in the future, students are able to express themselves without causing harm?
- (If positive impacts were identified) What should students do next to ensure their voices are heard?

For students who engaged in inappropriate behaviors, schools should offer restorative disciplinary processes to provide a formal opportunity for students to take accountability for their actions and actively repair harm. Such a process will generally involve individual [restorative conversations](#) and [peace circles](#) with the students who

engaged in inappropriate behaviors as well as those who were affected by their actions. Ultimately, the goal is for students who caused harm to work with impacted parties to create a mutually agreed upon plan for how the harm will be repaired.

[The CPS Restorative Practices Guide and Toolkit](#) provides how-to resources for conducting restorative processes in your school. It is highly recommended that school staff receive training prior to facilitating a restorative process. Please see the [OSEL Restorative Practices Professional Learning Calendar](#) to find dates for upcoming trainings. If your school is in need of immediate or additional support, please contact your [Network SEL Specialist](#) or Ben McKay at bmmckay@cps.edu.