

Framework FAQs

1. What is the purpose of the Framework?

American independent schools are among this country's greatest resources, models of innovation, excellence, and expanded opportunity. For that reason, they enjoy uncommonly high levels of public support. And yet, they face challenges similar to those besetting other educational institutions, including public schools, colleges, and universities: rising polarization, intense politicization, and as a result, increased community conflict. These challenges include increasing litigation in the areas of admissions, curriculum, student behavior, adult misconduct, risk management, and employment; the erosion of long-standing traditions of judicial deference to the independence of schools; loss of public confidence in the ability of teachers to provide instruction on sensitive or controversial subjects; and frequent, often hostile, attacks on schools from parent groups, lawmakers, and increasingly, the media.

The purpose of the Framework is to encourage conversations surrounding complex current issues without taking on a one-size-fits-all model. Instead, the Framework will offer a new approach toward institutional reflection and assessment. It provides a consensus among school constituencies and a more comprehensive approach on how to navigate addressing controversial issues.

2. Why was the Framework created?

Secondary school leaders have sometimes struggled to reconcile the interests of competing constituencies, meet the needs of a politically diverse student body and bridge a growing divide between the political views of parents and teachers. Ninety-seven percent of school leaders cite polarization as one of the leading challenges they face, and they – on behalf of their schools – face considerable pressure to publicly address a wide range of social and political events by issuing expressions of institutional solidarity and affirmation. Levels of morale among those working in schools has declined and fewer and fewer young adults express interest in pursuing education as a career.

In addition, schools have seen precipitous declines in health and well-being of children, including rising levels of anxiety and depression, social isolation, and diminished opportunities for meaningful peer connection. Fear of peer pressure, driven in large part by social media, has led to increasing levels of self-censorship among young people, a chilled speech climate and often an atmosphere of wariness and suspicion.

These trends raise important questions about the future of schools and their role in the larger society. The intent of the Framework is not to mandate one approach to many complex issues but to encourage conversation within school communities and offer a vehicle for institutional reflection and assessment, while also providing opportunities for

shared understanding and consensus building among various school constituencies and stakeholders.

3. Who developed the Framework?

The Framework was prepared by Deerfield Academy Head of School Dr. John Austin with input from a task force of eight highly respected sitting independent school heads representing a diverse range of schools from across the country, Funding for this project , came in part from a grant awarded by the E.E. Ford Foundation to Deerfield Academy and Dr. Austin in 2023.

4. Why are the principles outlined in the Framework important for students to understand?

Many young Americans have lost faith in the ideal of expressive freedom as a defining value of American life. That loss of faith crosses political and party lines and extends deeply into our schools.

Schools can play a crucial role in reversing these trends by fostering norms of expressive freedom and inculcating in their students a robust understanding of the essential role that freedom plays when responsibly exercised in advancing inquiry and knowledge.

5. Is the Framework meant to encourage discussion on controversial issues?

It is based on the simple assumption that schools are, first and foremost, places of inquiry and exploration that prepare students for the freedoms, rights, and responsibilities they will enjoy as adults. Part of developing those methods of inquiry is to cultivate a willingness to listen deeply to a spectrum of arguments, including some that are sometimes unpopular or provocative. The Framework lays out guidelines to help educators encourage students to engage regularly with arguments with which they may disagree or find offensive. It is based on the point of view that shielding students from controversial views does not necessarily serve them well in the long run, knowing that in their adult lives they cannot reasonably expect to only encounter viewpoints they agree with or find undisputable.

A large component of creating an environment that promotes argument inclusivity and viewpoint diversity is providing guidance for educators and other school leaders on how to create a space where curiosity and inquiry can take root and flourish.

6. How should teachers ensure that students feel comfortable expressing ideas and beliefs in the classroom?

The Framework offers several guidelines for creating a space for intellectual diversity in the classroom. This includes recognizing the asymmetrical relationships of power

inherent in the teacher-student relationship, and the potential conflict of interest between a teacher's duty to actively support a student's intellectual growth and autonomy and the expression of their own partisan and political beliefs.

To that end, teachers should exercise considerable discretion when expressing their own views and beliefs in the classroom, using that freedom sparingly and only when it supports the intellectual agency of students. Diana Hess, Dean of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin, calls this the "pedagogical tools approach." Such an approach defers to the professional judgment of teachers in deciding when and how to share their views on a contested issue but recognizes the dangers on the part of teachers of oversharing, grandstanding, and the unnecessary interjection of personal views.

The Framework also encourages educators to advance argument diversity by recognizing it as a defining feature of the study of contemporary issues of justice and social change. Questions of social and economic justice in particular should be approached as open, unsettled and informed by diverse traditions of thought, present and past.

7. In what ways does the Framework prepare students for life after school?

Students are ill-served when they are shielded from the discussion of issues that are open, contested, and unsettled in the public sphere but closed on campus. Rather than protect students from new ideas or reflexively affirm existing beliefs and commitments, schools should routinely ask students to engage with material that discomfits, unsettles, and runs counter to prevailing orthodoxies. Schools, in short, should envision learning as a sustained encounter with the challenging and the unfamiliar. The classroom is a place where established beliefs and commitments are explored and tested against competing arguments. We believe this is one of the most important aspects of preparing students for a diverse, complicated, and sometimes contentious world.

8. How will the school encourage intellectual diversity and expressive freedom while still maintaining a safe and secure learning environment?

The physical safety of students is paramount, and the maintenance of a safe and secure learning environment should always be the top priority. There is no room for bullying, harassment or intimidation in our schools, and all students and faculty should be expected to uphold their existing anti-bullying and anti-harassment principles.

The Framework encourages schools to highlight the importance of conscientiousness of expression. As explained in the Framework, this means:

- Teaching young people to understand the impact of their speech on others;
- Providing them with the skills—and opportunities to practice—speaking with consideration, civility, and temperateness;

- Encouraging thoughtful self-regulation and civility;
- Charging them with actively co-creating with peers a climate of mutual respect where all voices are welcome and heard.

9. How should schools promote discourse, guided by the three pillars laid out in this Framework, in a way that is compatible with its values, expectations and mission?

The three pillars are meant to serve as guidelines for schools. These should be implemented by schools in a manner that best aligns with their values, expectations, and mission. Schools can use as much or as little of these guidelines as they desire.

Throughout time they can adopt and adjust how these guidelines fit in with their individual needs. The guidelines have been created broadly to apply to many different aspects of schools, making them adaptable to institutions with vast ranges of individual identities and needs.

Specific to Deerfield, the Framework is in close alignment with our mission of encouraging students to develop an inquisitive, creative mind and strong moral character. It is meant to provide guidance to support many of our core values including citizenship in a spirit of humility, empathy and responsibility, connectedness, and the promotion of intellectual vitality and self-understanding.

10. How will the Framework affect the culture and environment of secondary schools?

The Framework is intended to create a more inclusive environment for the debate of ideas where students feel encouraged, respected, and sometimes challenged when sharing their thoughts. It also aims to provide guidelines for faculty so that students feel more empowered to share their individual ideas free in an environment that seeks to minimize conformity bias and confirmation bias.

11. How are schools expected to utilize the Framework?

The Framework is not meant to be exact rules for every school to follow. Schools are vastly different across the educational spectrum, with their own customs, identities, and cultures. This Framework was created as guidance. Schools may adopt the framework (or parts of it), revise it in the context of their own missions, or reject it entirely. We view each of these outcomes as a positive one.

12. What schools should utilize the Framework?

Drawing inspiration from 20th century documents drafted by colleges and universities, this framework was created to provide a similar template for schools in America. However, the hope is that the Framework will be utilized by all types of K to 12 schools including public, parochial, and charter. The Framework serves as especially useful for school leaders, Boards, faculty, and teachers as they navigate their crucial roles in our current social climate. While

the way the Framework is put into practice may change depending on the kind of school, it is our strong belief that the general principles espoused will be beneficial to contemplate by both public and private institutions.