

# CIVILITY/CIVILITY CODE

(BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR POLICY REVIEW COMMITTEE)

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The topic of civility has gained notoriety at the present time, partially due to highly publicized news stories about related issues such as bullying, workplace violence and harassment, contentious political campaigns and the actions of governmental organizations, nationally and locally. The media and popular culture seem to advocate for the angry argument as the mode of communication. Boards of education and school districts are bucking the increasingly common “in-your-face” model of dealing with conflict.

These days, people at public meetings are displaying more aggressive behavior than in the past. While we are aware of the problem, the problem appears to be getting worse. A 2011 survey conducted by Shandwick and Tate found that 65% of the respondents believe incivility is a major problem in America today. Other studies revealed the growth of incivility at work and that it was getting increasingly worse. Students, faculty, staff and boards of education have also experienced incivility of some kind in school districts.

Civility can be defined simply as civilized conduct; especially courtesy, politeness, or simply a polite act or expression. It may also be defined as the extent to which individuals speak and act in ways that demonstrate a caring for the welfare of others, as well as the welfare of the culture they share in common. Therefore, civility can be associated with qualities that are valued as the virtues and manners of individuals which include tolerance, self-restraint, mutual respect, commitment to other people, social concern, involvement and responsibility.

It also relates to professionalism, ethics, leadership, compassion, empathy, civicness, etiquette and decorum. In short, civility can be seen as an expansive term open to subjective interpretation.

Within the setting of a school system, incivility can be defined as any self-centered behavior that is impolite, boorish or shows a disregard to the rights of others, whether they be students, staff, parents or community members. It has been also referred to as bullying, emotional abuse or mobbing. Uncivil conduct includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- directing vulgar, obscene or profane gestures or words at another individual;
- taunting, jeering, inciting others to taunt or jeer at an individual;
- raising one’s voice at another individual, repeatedly interrupting another individual who is speaking at an appropriate time and place;
- imposing personal demands at times or in settings where they conflict with assigned duties and cannot be reasonably met;
- using personal epithets, gesturing in a manner that puts another in fear for his/her personal safety;
- invading the personal space of an individual after being directed to move away, physically blocking an individual’s exit from a room or location;
- remaining in a classroom or school area after a teacher or administrator in authority has directed one to leave;
- violating the privacy of another individual’s belongings (except for lawful searches conducted by school officials); or
- other similar disruptive conduct.

## **CIVILITY/CIVILITY CODE**

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Uncivil conduct does not include the expression of controversial or differing viewpoints that may be offensive to some persons, provided (1) the ideas are presented in a respectful manner and at a time and place that are appropriate, and (2) such expression does not materially disrupt, and may not be reasonably anticipated to disrupt, the educational and/or meeting process. Such differing viewpoints are permitted within the freedom of expression guaranteed by the First Amendment.

School systems need to care about encouraging civility in district schools and in the manner in which those within the educational community interact with each other. Incivility impacts organizational integrity, employee satisfaction, and student outcomes. Incivility has the potential to influence all aspects of the school campus, including satisfaction and productivity among board of education members, faculty, staff and students.

Numerous studies have taken place to review the effects of incivility on worker satisfaction, organizational integrity, and productivity. Incivility can be linked to decreased job performance and satisfaction. A safe, civil environment is essential to high board, student and staff achievement, to the free exchange of ideas central to a quality educational process, and to the development of youth as thoughtful participants in our democracy. Conversely, uncivil conduct, like other forms of disruptive behavior, interferes with a board's ability to fulfill its appropriate leadership role and with a student's ability to learn and a school's ability to educate its students.

It is necessary for board members, administrators, faculty, staff, students, volunteers, parents and other community members to maintain a clear expectation of civil conduct and problem-solving throughout the school district. The board of education should be committed to set an example in its deliberations at its meetings. Moreover, the board should provide the training and resources necessary to support this expectation and refuse to condone uncivil conduct at board meetings, on school grounds or at school-sponsored activities, whether by board members, staff, students, parents, volunteers or other visitors to the district.

Civility codes provide ground rules for communication among board members, teachers, parents and students.

### **Policy Implications**

Policies pertaining to the issue of civility can provide direction for the board of education's actions, students and for community-school district interactions. The purposes of such policies are to promote a work and learning environment that is safe, productive and nurturing for all board members, staff and students, which encourage the free flow of ideas without fear or intimidation. Students would be provided with appropriate models for respectful problem-solving by such policies. In addition, such policies could reduce the potential triggers for violent conduct, such as fear, anger, frustration and alienation.

*This code of conduct was adopted by the CABE Board of Directors on February 12, 2020.*

## **Bylaws of the Board**

### **Conflict of Interest**

### **Civility Code**

As a member of the \_\_\_\_\_ Board of Education, I will strive to improve student achievement in public education, and to that end I will:

- Attend all Board meetings insofar as possible, review relevant information and become informed concerning the issues to be considered at those meetings;
- Recognize my responsibility as an agent of the State to seek the improvement of education throughout the State;
- Focus my attention on fulfilling the Board's responsibilities of goal setting, policymaking, and evaluation;
- Ensure that all sides have a fair opportunity to present their respective positions;
- Recognize that a board member has no authority as an individual, and that decisions can only be made by a majority vote at a board meeting;
- Ensure that criticism of opposing viewpoints is expressed as criticism of a position, not a person when advocating for a belief or position;
- Arrive at conclusions only after discussing all aspects of the issue at hand with my fellow Board members in a meeting;
- Respect the opinions of others, and abide by each decision of the Board as a whole, regardless of my personal vote;
- Listen respectfully to those who communicate with the board, seeking to understand their views, while recognizing my responsibility to represent the interests of the entire community;
- Strive for a positive working relationship with the superintendent, respecting the superintendent's authority to advise the board, implement board policy, and administer the district;
- Recognize the importance of an effective governance team;
- Respect the rights of the minority while working toward the will of the majority, and recognize the importance of achieving consensus as an important tool in community-building;
- Work with other Board members to establish effective Board policies and to delegate authority for the administration of the schools to the superintendent;
- Support the employment of those persons best qualified to serve as school staff, and insist on a regular and impartial evaluation of all staff by appropriate supervisors;
- Conduct all business in an open and transparent manner, consistent with the intent and spirit of the open meeting law requirements;

## Bylaws of the Board

### Civility Code (continued)

- Respect the confidentiality of information that is privileged under applicable law and refrain from unauthorized disclosure of matters discussed in executive session;
- Model civility to students, employees, and all elements of the community by encouraging the free expression of opinion by all board members and engaging in respectful dialogue with fellow board members on matters being considered by the board.
- Present personal criticism of district operations or of any employee directly to the Superintendent;
- Understand the chain of command and refer problems or complaints to the proper administrative office while refraining from actions that could compromise my ability to act if the issue rises to the board level;
- Take no private action that will compromise the Board and administration;
- Refrain from using the board position for personal or partisan gain and avoid any conflict of interest or the appearance of impropriety;
- Be informed about the duties of school board members and current educational issues through professional development, such as programs sponsored by my state and national school boards associations;
- Remember always that my first and greatest concern must be the educational welfare of the students attending the \_\_\_\_\_ Public Schools.

### Sources:

CABE Model Policy

Virginia School Boards Association Code of Conduct for School Board Members

Texas Association of School Boards Ethics for Board Members

North Carolina School Boards Association Code of Ethics

Illinois Association of School Boards Code of Conduct

Hamden and Norwalk Board of Education Code of Ethics

### Meeting Protocol

To ensure that the Board's meetings are conducted with maximum effectiveness and efficiency, members will:

- come to meetings adequately prepared;
- identify issues of concern before the meeting, whenever possible;
- circulate proposed motions and amendments, whenever possible, at least 48 hours before meeting;
- speak only when recognized;
- not interrupt each other during debate;

## **Bylaws of the Board**

### **Civility Code**

#### **Meeting Protocol** (continued)

- not engage in disruptive and disrespectful side conversations;
- minimize unnecessary repetition;
- not monopolize the discussion;
- address the merits of the issue being discussed without appealing to the biases, prejudices and emotions of the audience;
- support the chair of the meeting's efforts to facilitate an orderly meeting;
- communicate openly and actively in discussion and dialog to avoid surprises;
- value equal participation of all members;
- practice respectful body language;
- listen actively when other members speak; and
- not surprise or embarrass each other or members of the staff.

(cf. 9005 – Statement of Integrity)

(cf. 9270 – Conflict of Interest)

(cf. 9271 – Code of Ethics)

Bylaw adopted by the Board:

cps 1/14

rev 2/20

*Another version of this bylaw to consider.*

## **Bylaws of the Board**

### **Conflict of Interest**

### **Civility Code**

In order to promote mutual respect, civility, and orderly conduct among the members of the Board of Education (Board), this bylaw shall provide the ground rules to be followed by the members of the Board. This bylaw is not intended to deprive any member of the Board of his/her right to freedom of expression, but only to maintain, to the extent possible and reasonable, a safe, harassment-free meeting place for the activities of the Board. In the interest of presenting the Board and its individual members as positive role models to the staff, students, and the community, the Board encourages positive communication and discourages volatile, hostile, or aggressive behavior. To achieve this objective, the following guidelines will be followed:

1. We will communicate openly and honestly.
2. What is said in the group stays in the group.
3. We will not allow side conversations.
4. Everyone will listen attentively to each other.
5. We will not personalize ideas.
6. We will respect the dignity of each other.
7. We will not allow interruptions.
8. Everyone will contribute, there will be no observers.
9. The meeting will begin and end on time.

(cf. 9005 – Statement of Integrity)

(cf. 9270 – Conflict of Interest)

(cf. 9271 – Code of Ethics)

Bylaw adopted by the Board:

cps 1/14

*Norwalk's version to consider.*

## **Bylaws of the Board**

### **Conflict of Interest**

### **Civility Code**

#### **Norwalk Board of Education Civility Code**

*As a Member of the Norwalk Board of Education, I will strive to improve education, and to that end I will:*

1. Attend all regularly scheduled Board meetings insofar as possible, and become informed concerning the issues to be considered at those meetings;
2. Recognize that I should endeavor to make policy decisions only after full discussion at publicly held Board meetings;
3. Clearly distinguish opinions from facts. And, render all decisions based on the available and verifiable facts and my independent judgment, and refuse to surrender that judgment to individuals or special interest groups;
4. Respect all Board members through words and actions, and demonstrate respect for the diverse views of all citizens in our society;
5. When advocating for a belief or position, ensure that criticism of opposing viewpoints is expressed as criticism of a position, not a person;
6. Be a positive role model for public discourse - practice courtesy, politeness, and consideration;
7. Ensure that all sides have a fair opportunity to present their respective positions;
8. Work with other Board members to establish effective Board policies and to delegate authority for the administration of the schools to the Superintendent;
9. Take no private action that will compromise the Board and administration; and
10. Remember always that my first and greatest concern must be the educational welfare of the students attending the Norwalk Public Schools.

**Note:** *The members of the Norwalk Board of Education sign this document.*

Bylaw adopted by the Board:

cps 1/14