

Guidance and Interpretation for Viewpoint-Neutral Education in Support of Student-Centered Open Inquiry

The purpose of this document is to provide authoritative guidance and interpretation of the *Standards for Viewpoint-Neutral Education in Support of Student-Centered Open Inquiry* at the Laboratory Schools. It elaborates the standards, explains their rationale, and applies them to concrete situations in order to support consistent, good-faith application across divisions.

This document does not establish new standards. Rather, it interprets and gives practical effect to the standards set out in the companion standards document, and should be consulted when questions, ambiguity, or uncertainty arise in practice. Together, the two documents form a single, integrated framework: the standards document sets the governing expectations; this document provides the interpretive guidance needed to apply them thoughtfully and consistently.

The remainder of this document proceeds as follows:

- **Section I** grounds the approach in the Laboratory Schools’ mission and the University of Chicago tradition of teaching students how to think, not what to think, and defines *student-centered open inquiry* and *viewpoint-neutral education* as the organizing commitments of this document.
- **Section II** sets out the core standards for protecting students’ intellectual freedom and viewpoint diversity in classrooms and school spaces, addressing academic freedom and shared responsibilities, scholarly and objective presentation without endorsement, classroom climate, developmental appropriateness, universal civic norms versus contested issues, and neutrality in the broader school environment.
- **Section III** explains how these expectations are supported and applied through shared professional responsibility and administrative partnership—emphasizing guidance, professional learning, collaborative problem-solving, and consistency—while aligning the approach with the Faculty Expectations framework and clarifying implementation and process.
- **Section IV** provides practical guideposts for navigating ambiguity and gray areas, including questions about empirical resolvability, scholarly consensus, politicization, and the role of moral, political, or religious conviction.
- **Section V** clarifies how Lab can teach certain widely settled historical and moral judgments without closing inquiry, and how to exercise caution when the line between settled and contested is not sharp.
- **Appendix A & B: Illustrative Case Studies and Compare-and-Contrast Examples** apply the standards to concrete situations. The Case Studies are intended to address many of the questions and ambiguities that naturally arise in reading the earlier sections. They are a living set of examples, and Lab will add additional Case Studies as new questions emerge in practice.
- **Appendix C: Flow Charts** provide decision-making tools to guide and support professional judgment and shared norms.

A reader may want to review this document front-to-back in its entirety; however, the examples in Appendices A and B are also presented so that they may be reviewed independently.

I. Mission, Academic Freedom, and the Chicago Tradition

The Laboratory Schools' approach to teaching and learning is grounded in a long-standing University of Chicago commitment: education should teach students **how to think, not what to think**. As the Free Expression Committee explains in [*Teaching How to Think, Not What to Think*](#), this principle runs from John Dewey's insistence that learning is measured by "the quality of mental process, not the production of correct answers," to Robert Hutchins's view that students must "think always for themselves."

This policy builds directly on that framework. The Committee's report articulates the intellectual foundations of Lab's obligations, drawing on:

- the Kalven principle's warning that institutional orthodoxies risk "censuring any minority who do not agree with the view adopted";
- the collective bargaining agreement's requirement that controversial issues be presented in a "scholarly and objective manner"; and
- research highlighting the risk that educator authority can unintentionally shape or constrain student views.

The purpose of this policy is to translate these shared principles into clear, consistent expectations for engaging controversial or contested issues across N–12 contexts. It applies to all Laboratory Schools employees and to all instructional activities and school environments. This policy governs employee conduct in professional contexts and employee-curated instructional and school environments.

This policy is not intended to limit inquiry or discourage engagement with difficult or important topics at any level. No subject is out of bounds. Rather, it is intended to ensure that Lab classrooms and school spaces remain **student-centered environments of open inquiry**—places where younger students learn the basics of fruitful and exploratory inquiry and engagement with the ideas and experiences of others and more mature students can explore ideas freely and seriously, without feeling steered toward particular conclusions by the authority of adults.

By *student-centered open inquiry*, we mean an instructional approach in which students' questions, reasoning, and intellectual development are placed at the center of learning, while educators:

- structure inquiry using developmentally appropriate scholarly and disciplinary standards;
- exercise professional restraint in signaling personal views; and
- avoid establishing political, ideological, or moral orthodoxies—whether explicit or implicit.

Viewed this way, viewpoint-neutral education is not a constraint on conversation. Rather, it is a pre-condition for expansive, student-centered, age- and developmentally-appropriate conversation.

II. Protecting Students’ Intellectual Freedom and Viewpoint Diversity

This section provides expanded guidance and interpretation of the standards set out in Section II of the *Standards for Viewpoint-Neutral Education in Support of Student-Centered Open Inquiry*. Each subsection corresponds directly to one or more of those standards.

The central aim of viewpoint-neutral education is to protect students’ intellectual freedom by ensuring that classrooms and school spaces do not privilege or presume a “correct” political, ideological, religious, or moral position on contested issues. Achieving this aim requires attention to instructional choices, classroom dynamics, developmental appropriateness, and the broader school environment.

A. Academic Freedom and Shared Responsibilities (Standards 1-2)

Academic freedom in the Lab Schools carries both rights and responsibilities. Educators are free to bring relevant materials, questions, and perspectives into the classroom—and are responsible for doing so in ways that:

- maintain academic and disciplinary standards;
- avoid political or ideological advocacy;
- respect the diversity of student and family viewpoints; and
- remain appropriate to students’ developmental levels.

Because of the power differential between educators and students, even casual expressions of an educator’s personal views on contested issues can chill discussion or foreclose students’ independent intellectual exploration. These considerations apply not only to formal instruction but also to the educator’s role in shaping the learning environment.

B. Scholarly and Objective Presentation Without Endorsement (Standard 1)

When controversial topics arise, they should be presented:

- in an academic and factually grounded manner;
- with objectivity, avoiding endorsement of a particular perspective; and
- in ways that invite students to evaluate arguments, evidence, and reasoning for themselves.

Objectivity is not “both-sidesism.” It does not require treating all claims as equally valid. Rather, it reflects obligations of fairness, balance, accuracy, and intellectual honesty, including avoiding misrepresentation or dismissal of opposing views.

C. Classroom Climate and Respect for Viewpoint Diversity (Standard 3)

Educators should strive to create learning environments in which:

- students with different political, cultural, religious, or ideological perspectives feel equally respected and included;
- educators do not signal or assume a “correct” viewpoint on contested issues;

- disagreement is treated as a normal and productive feature of intellectual life;
- students engage opposing arguments through reasoned analysis rather than exclusion or ostracism; and
- there is no proselytizing for any political, social, ideological, or religious cause.

D. Developmentally Appropriate Engagement (Standard 4)

Engagement with controversial issues must align with students’ developmental readiness. Educators should ensure that:

- younger students are not asked—actively or passively—to take political or ideological stances;
- instructional choices match students’ capacity to understand and evaluate complex issues; and
- sensitive topics are introduced with care and appropriate context.

For young learners, viewpoint-neutral education does not mean avoiding concreteness. It means being careful about what is made concrete. Educators should feel supported in using stories, examples, role-play, and classroom practices to model shared norms and everyday moral expectations, while exercising restraint about making contested political, religious, or ideological conclusions concrete through symbols, slogans, tools, or activities that tend to resolve contested questions for students rather than leaving them open for inquiry.

As students mature and develop greater capacity for abstraction and critical reasoning, instruction may appropriately shift toward more explicit examination of competing perspectives, arguments, and trade-offs—always with attention to scholarly objectivity, openness, and the effects of educator authority.

E. Universal Norms, Implicit Learning, and Contested Issues (Standard 5)

Especially in early and elementary grades, educators necessarily teach and model universal and classroom norms—such as kindness, fairness, honesty, inclusion, listening, and helping others. Teaching and modeling these norms is not ideological advocacy; it is essential to the functioning of a pluralistic school community.

Educators may design activities that reinforce these norms (e.g., service projects, inclusive read-alouds). However, Lab distinguishes between such social learning and explicit advocacy on contested issues. Instruction should not aim to persuade or direct students toward particular political, ideological, or moral positions on contested matters.

Educators should also be attentive to whether an issue is settled or actively contested. Some moral judgments are appropriately taught as settled historical conclusions. Others—despite strong personal convictions—remain contested and therefore require heightened neutrality and restraint.

The goal is not moral neutrality, but viewpoint-neutral education in support of student-centered open inquiry on contested questions, so students can think and decide for themselves.

F. Neutrality in the School Environment (Standard 6)

Protecting open inquiry requires attention not only to lesson content but also to the broader school environment, including:

- employee behavior while at work; and
- the physical environment of classrooms and school spaces.

School spaces should not be used by adults to promote political messages, ideological causes, or advocacy positions through posters, signage, and other symbolic displays. This does not preclude the temporary use of materials for instructional purposes when framed for inquiry and tied to curricular goals. Outside professional contexts, personal expression is protected.

III. Shared Professional Responsibility and Administrative Partnership

Viewpoint-neutral education depends on shared norms, professional judgment, and partnership.

A. Partnership and Responsibilities

Educators will:

- establish classroom norms to maintain a scholarly learning environment;
- share curricular plans as specified by divisional leadership;
- apply these principles consistently;
- exercise professional judgment and seek guidance when uncertain;
- reflect on practice and improvement;
- avoid personal political or ideological expression in teaching contexts; and
- respect families' roles in guiding values.

Administrators will:

- provide guidance and collaborative problem-solving;
- support professional development;
- offer clarity where interpretation is difficult; and
- ensure consistent feedback and accountability when practices depart from these standards.

The expectation is partnership, not surveillance.

B. Alignment with the Faculty Expectations Framework

The expectations set out in this policy align with the Laboratory Schools' Faculty Expectations framework and are intended to support professional growth across divisions and roles. Viewpoint-neutral, student-centered open inquiry is not a discrete or add-on expectation; it is a dimension of effective practice that may be reflected across multiple domains of the Faculty Expectations framework.

In particular, evidence related to this policy may arise in:

- **Domain 1: Planning and Preparation**, through the selection of materials, framing of questions, and design of learning activities that support inquiry rather than adoption of conclusions on contested issues including clear articulation of learning objectives and what students should understand, be able to analyze, or be prepared to question at the conclusion of a lesson or unit.
- **Domain 2: Learning Environments**, through the cultivation of classroom climates and physical spaces that support respectful disagreement, promote dialogue and a sense of safety to share and reflect, and do not establish implicit orthodoxies through adult signaling.
- **Domain 3: Learning Experiences**, through instructional practices that invite independent student reasoning, fair engagement with competing perspectives, and careful facilitation of discussion on contested topics including transparent communication of the purpose of instructional content and intentional support for critical thinking and student autonomy in exploration and judgment.
- **Domain 4: Principled Teaching**, through reflective practice, professional judgment in navigating gray areas, and contributions to shared norms around open inquiry and viewpoint-neutral, student-centered open inquiry.
- **Domain 5: Professional Responsibilities**, through collaboration with colleagues and administrators, communication with families, participation in professional learning, and thoughtful boundary-setting around personal expression in professional contexts.

The purpose of this alignment is developmental. Naming these domains is intended to clarify where and how this work naturally shows up in professional practice—not to create a checklist or a new evaluative category. This policy is meant to provide a common framework for conversation, feedback, and continuous improvement, grounded in professional judgment, shared norms, and ongoing dialogue between educators and administrators.

C. Implementation, Guidance, and Professional Process

The expectations in this policy are intended to guide professional practice through clarity, reflection, and shared norms. Consistent with the principle of partnership rather than surveillance, implementation will emphasize guidance, professional learning, advance consultation, and collaborative problem-solving.

A core element of this approach is shared visibility into instructional planning. To support thoughtful guidance and early identification of potential questions or concerns, educators will be expected to share unit-level plans with divisional leadership in a manner appropriate to their instructional context. The purpose of this shared planning is not prior approval or constraint of professional judgment, but to ensure that administrators have a clear understanding of curricular and instructional goals, materials, and framing, and can engage in constructive dialogue with faculty before issues arise. Because instructional models differ across divisions, the specific form, timing, and level of detail of unit-level planning will be determined and communicated at the divisional level.

When questions or concerns arise, either educators or administrators may initiate consultation. Educators are encouraged to seek guidance from colleagues, department leaders, or administrators in advance or in the course of planning. Administrators likewise have a responsibility to raise questions, offer guidance, and initiate conversation when instructional plans or practices present uncertainty or potential tension with these standards. In all cases, the expectation is good-faith engagement focused on clarity, learning, and support.

Concerns about practice will ordinarily be addressed through conversation, coaching, and reflection in the first instance, whether initiated by an educator seeking guidance or by an administrator identifying a potential issue. Professional development, shared planning time, and case-based discussion will be used to build common understanding and consistency across divisions.

Documentation related to this policy, when appropriate, will focus on clarifying expectations, supporting improvement, and ensuring transparency. Patterns of practice that raise ongoing concerns will be addressed through established professional processes, with attention to context, intent, and opportunity for growth.

Nothing in these standards alters existing due-process protections or collective bargaining agreements. The goal is to sustain a culture of open inquiry and professional trust by making expectations clear, roles explicit, processes fair, and support readily available.

IV. Navigating Ambiguity and Gray Areas

Many situations resist easy categorization. When uncertainty arises, educators should err on the side of caution and use the following guideposts:

- Is the issue empirically resolvable?
- Is there a strong scholarly consensus?
- Is the issue newly politicized or rapidly changing?
- Does it centrally involve moral, political, ideological, or religious conviction?

The guiding approach should be thoughtful engagement, analytic presentation, fair treatment of multiple perspectives, and restraint in expressing personal views.

V. Teaching Settled Judgments Without Closing Inquiry

Viewpoint-neutral education does not require schools to treat all moral questions as perpetually open or all viewpoints as equally plausible. Some judgments—reflected in law, scholarship, and democratic practice—are reasonably taught as settled for the purposes of instruction. The educational task is not to erase moral judgment, but to model how moral judgment can coexist with intellectual humility, attention to evidence, and openness to challenge.

Even where historical and moral judgments are widely regarded as settled, viewpoint-neutral education does not require the suspension of inquiry or the foreclosure of questioning. Teaching the settled moral conclusion that racial segregation was wrong, for example, does not mean treating historical interpretation as closed, ignoring disagreement about means, motives, or consequences, or discouraging students from examining how such moral judgments came to be established, why they command broad agreement today, or why they did not in the past.

Because the line between settled and contested questions is not always sharp—and because reasonable people may disagree about where that line should be drawn—educators should approach these judgments reflectively and in conversation with colleagues. When an issue could plausibly be understood as

contemporarily contested, educators should err on the side of caution with respect to viewpoint neutrality. Supporting this kind of professional and intellectual dialogue is a core part of sustaining a culture of open inquiry, not a threat to it.

Appendix: Illustrative Case Studies

These case studies are intended to help educators and administrators apply the principles of viewpoint-neutral education and student-centered open inquiry to concrete situations. Each is written to surface where the boundary lies, not to assign blame for any particular choices.

Case Study 1: Environmental Stewardship and Action

A classroom completes a unit on ecosystems, pollution, and waste. Students learn about landfills, plastic waste, and the effects of pollution on animals and natural habitats. The unit emphasizes caring for shared spaces and being responsible members of a community.

As a culminating activity, the class proposes several actions:

- creating posters encouraging classmates to reduce single-use plastics;
- organizing a classroom or school-wide challenge to bring waste-free lunches; and
- writing letters to city officials advocating for a ban on plastic bags.

The activities are presented as ways for students to “take action” based on what they have learned.

Educational Merits

Many elements of the unit align well with these standards:

- teaching foundational scientific concepts related to ecosystems and pollution;
- connecting abstract environmental ideas to students’ everyday experiences;
- reinforcing universal norms such as responsibility, care for shared resources, and cooperation; and
- engaging students through concrete, hands-on activities appropriate to their developmental stage.

These components support student-centered learning and allow students to act on shared values without requiring sophisticated policy reasoning.

Assessing Where Heightened Attention to Neutrality Is Required

Applying the Committee’s guideposts helps clarify the nature of the issues raised by the proposed culminating activities.

While environmental impacts such as pollution and waste can be studied empirically, decisions about how communities should respond—through regulation, individual behavior, market mechanisms, or technological innovation—are not resolvable by evidence alone. There is no settled scholarly or societal consensus on specific policy tools such as plastic bag bans, which involve trade-offs related to cost,

access, effectiveness, and unintended consequences. Environmental policy remains actively contested and politicized, and views about responsibility and solutions are closely tied to moral convictions.

Taken together, these considerations indicate that specific environmental policy solutions constitute contested issues, calling for heightened neutrality and care in how they are presented to students.

Why This Matters for Student-Centered Open Inquiry

This unit asks students to reason through concrete examples and modeled behavior. Some concrete actions—such as encouraging classmates to care for shared spaces or reduce waste within the school community—can reflect widely shared norms of cooperation and responsibility without resolving broader public questions.

At the same time, educators should be mindful that even activities focused on personal behavior can implicitly answer contested questions—such as whether individual action or public policy matters most, or whether stewardship, regulation, or innovation is the primary path forward for addressing environmental challenges. When concrete classroom activities are framed in ways that suggest a single correct answer to those questions, students may be guided toward conclusions about complex public issues before they are prepared to examine alternatives through inquiry.

In addition, requiring students to direct advocacy outward toward public authorities or to promote a specific policy outcome makes a contested judgment concrete and authoritative. That framing narrows the space for inquiry by resolving a live public question in advance, rather than leaving open the broader question of how societies balance environmental goals with other priorities.

Flow Chart Lens

Applying the Instruction Flow Chart in Appendix C helps clarify where this proposal requires heightened care and professional judgment.

The subject matter—environmental science and stewardship—is academically relevant and appropriately situated within a lower school curriculum (**Step 2**). Students can engage meaningfully with concepts such as pollution, waste, and care for shared spaces through concrete examples and modeled behavior (**Step 3**).

At **Step 4 (scholarly and objective presentation without endorsement)**, the unit can be framed in a neutral and descriptive manner at the level of scientific instruction and classroom discussion. Educators may present environmental harms and policy trade-offs without endorsing particular policy solutions or conclusions about values, and Step 4 can be satisfied with respect to instructional framing.

The proposal nonetheless breaks down at **Step 5 (reasonable perception of advocacy)** with respect to activities that direct students toward advocating for a specific policy outcome, such as a plastic bag ban. Such activities introduce action-oriented tasks that presuppose a contested judgment about how environmental problems should be addressed. Regardless of intent or verbal neutrality, a reasonable student or family could perceive this as school-endorsed advocacy rather than inquiry.

This breakdown does not suggest that environmental stewardship or civic responsibility should be avoided. Rather, it signals the need to revise culminating activities so that they model shared norms of care and responsibility without embedding contested policy judgments in authoritative classroom actions. As in other cases, the distinction illustrates a central feature of viewpoint-neutral education: **scholarly neutrality of presentation (Step 4) is necessary but not sufficient when the structure or outcome of an activity itself resolves a contested public question (Step 5).**

Application of Standards

Under the standards:

- Teaching environmental science and fostering care for shared spaces is appropriate.
- Encouraging concrete practices that reflect shared civic norms is appropriate when framed as local, non-exhaustive, and non-prescriptive.
- Studying environmental policy debates and competing approaches to environmental protection is appropriate.
- Requiring students to advocate for a specific policy solution on a contested issue is not appropriate in lower school settings.

An appropriate approach models shared responsibility while preserving openness about how environmental problems are understood and addressed.

Case Study 2: Patriotism and National Identity

A lower school classroom includes a unit on national symbols, civic traditions, and shared community life. Students learn about the flag, national holidays, and basic features of democratic government. The unit emphasizes gratitude for freedoms, respect for public institutions, and shared civic responsibility.

As part of the unit, the teacher:

- decorates the classroom with patriotic imagery;
- leads discussions highlighting positive aspects of the nation's history and institutions; and
- asks students to reflect on why the country is “a good place to live” or “the greatest country in the world.”

The activities are intended to foster civic pride and a sense of shared belonging.

Educational Merits

Several elements of the unit align well with these standards:

- introducing students to civic symbols and shared traditions;
- fostering a sense of belonging and community;
- encouraging understanding of democratic institutions; and
- engaging students through concrete stories, rituals, and visual materials appropriate to their developmental stage.

Helping young students understand that they are members of a broader civic community is a legitimate and important educational goal.

Assessing Where Heightened Attention to Neutrality Is Required

Applying the Committee’s guideposts helps clarify the nature of the issues raised by the unit.

While basic facts about national symbols and civic institutions can be taught descriptively, evaluative claims about national identity—such as whether a country is “the greatest,” how its history should be judged, or what patriotism properly requires—are not empirically resolvable. There is no settled scholarly or societal consensus on these questions, which remain actively debated and closely tied to moral, cultural, and political conviction. Views about national identity and patriotism also shift over time and differ across communities.

Taken together, these considerations indicate that evaluative judgments about national identity constitute contested issues, calling for heightened neutrality and care in instructional framing.

Why This Matters for Child-Centered Open Inquiry

When educators present positive or negative evaluations of the nation as settled truths—rather than as one way people understand their country—we are telling students how they should feel and think about a contested question, rather than inviting them to examine alternatives. Instructional approaches that frame national history exclusively through celebration or exclusively through condemnation resolve evaluative conclusions in advance of inquiry.

In the context of the lesson outlined above, patriotic symbols and narratives do not function as neutral background. They make an evaluative stance concrete: that good civic membership involves holding a particular view of national greatness or moral standing. This framing narrows the space for inquiry by resolving questions about patriotism, critique, and belonging in advance, rather than leaving room for students to later explore how reasonable people relate to their country in different ways.

By contrast, teaching civic facts, shared symbols and practices, and the importance of participation can model belonging without dictating evaluative conclusions.

Flow Chart Lens

Applying the Instruction Flow Chart in Appendix C helps clarify where this proposal requires heightened care and professional judgment.

The subject matter—civic institutions, national symbols, and shared democratic practices—is academically relevant and appropriately situated within a lower school curriculum (**Step 2**). Students can engage meaningfully with civic facts, symbols, and practices through concrete stories and rituals that support belonging and participation (**Step 3**).

At **Step 4 (scholarly and objective presentation without endorsement)**, it is possible to teach about national symbols, holidays, and institutions in a neutral, descriptive manner. Educators can present factual

information about civic life and democratic processes without endorsing particular evaluative judgments about national greatness or moral standing. In this sense, Step 4 can be satisfied at the level of instructional content and discussion.

The proposal nonetheless raises concerns at **Step 5 (reasonable perception of advocacy)**. Classroom decorations and prompts that frame the nation as “the greatest country in the world,” or that invite students to affirm a particular evaluative stance toward national identity, function as authoritative endorsements rather than objects of inquiry. Regardless of intent, a reasonable student or family could perceive that a specific view of patriotism is being presented as the expected or correct one.

This breakdown does not suggest that fostering civic belonging or respect for democratic institutions is inappropriate. Rather, it signals the need to revise instructional choices so that shared civic practices and factual learning are not coupled with authoritative evaluative claims about national identity. As in other cases, the distinction illustrates a core feature of viewpoint-neutral education: **scholarly neutrality of presentation (Step 4) is necessary but not sufficient when symbols, prompts, or classroom environments themselves communicate endorsement on a contested question (Step 5).**

Application of Standards

Under the standards:

- Teaching about civic institutions, symbols, and democratic processes is appropriate.
- Modeling shared civic practices is appropriate.
- Instruction should distinguish between describing civic life and endorsing evaluative claims about national identity.
- Educators should avoid presenting contested judgments about patriotism or national moral standing as settled truths.

An appropriate approach emphasizes participation, shared practices, and democratic norms, while preserving openness about how individuals and communities understand patriotism and national identity.

Case Study 3: Moral Responsibility and Being an Upstander

An advisory program includes a unit on responsibility, empathy, and responding to harm. As part of the unit, educators emphasize the importance of:

- recognizing injustice or exclusion when it occurs;
- speaking up rather than remaining silent;
- using one’s position or “privilege” to support others; and
- understanding that neutrality in the face of harm can itself be a moral failure.

These themes are woven into discussions, examples, and reflection prompts, and are applied to contemporary social and civic situations in which students are asked to consider how moral responsibility operates in practice. Students are encouraged to see “being an upstander” in these

contemporary situations as a core marker of moral maturity. The intent is to help students develop ethical awareness and a sense of responsibility toward others.

Educational Merits

The program reflects several legitimate educational aims:

- encouraging students to take moral questions seriously;
- fostering empathy and concern for others;
- helping students think about their responsibilities in a community; and
- responding to real social dynamics students encounter in school and beyond.

Assessing Where Heightened Attention to Neutrality Is Required

While some behaviors—such as explicit exclusion or targeted harassment—can often be identified descriptively, broader claims about what is ethically wrong or harmful are themselves matters of moral judgment. Questions such as what counts as harm, when speech or silence is morally blameworthy, and how to weigh competing risks and responsibilities are not empirically resolvable. There is no settled scholarly or societal consensus on these questions; reasonable people disagree sharply about them across ethical, cultural, and political traditions.

These disagreements arise along several related dimensions: how harm is defined; when responsibility attaches to speech, silence, or complicity; and how to balance competing forms of vulnerability, risk, and obligation in pluralistic societies. When instructional examples or discussions draw on contemporary public debates, these dimensions of disagreement become especially salient.

For example, some view questioning policies related to gender identity in athletics as a legitimate part of public debate about fairness to biological female athletes, while others view such questioning as dehumanizing and harmful to transgender athletes, and still others may share concerns on both sides while remaining uncertain about how those concerns should be resolved. Similarly, some view strong criticism of policing practices as a necessary form of democratic accountability, while others view such criticism as harmful because it may place officers at greater risk or erode public trust in institutions charged with public safety. These disagreements reflect contested moral judgments about harm, responsibility, and public discourse rather than disagreements about facts alone.

When a unit on moral responsibility engages issues of this kind, it implicates live, contested questions of ethical judgment and harm, calling for particular care in how conclusions are framed for students.

Why This Matters for Student-Centered Open Inquiry

When educators present particular conclusions about harm or ethical obligation as settled—rather than as judgments reasonable people actively disagree about—we are telling students how moral reasoning should conclude rather than inviting them to examine how moral reasoning works, and engage in it.

In this context, students may feel pressure to adopt a single moral posture in order to participate fully or to be seen as ethically serious. Students who hold different views—about what counts as harm, when speaking out is required, how to balance accountability with restraint, or how to weigh competing risks—may infer that their perspectives are unwelcome or morally suspect. This narrows the space for inquiry and limits students’ opportunity to grapple with genuine moral disagreement.

By contrast, instruction that treats judgments about harm and responsibility as questions to be examined—rather than answers to be adopted—preserves openness while still engaging moral seriousness. Students learn not only to care about others, but to reason carefully about why reasonable people disagree about ethical obligations, harm, and responsibility. It also promotes the civic value of learning how to respectfully disagree with others, rather than merely dismiss contrary views.

Flow Chart Lens

Applying the Instruction Flow Chart in Appendix C helps clarify where this proposal requires heightened care and professional judgment.

The subject matter—ethical responsibility, empathy, and community norms—is academically relevant and appropriately situated within a middle school advisory context (**Step 2**). Middle school students are developmentally capable of engaging with moral questions, reflecting on social experience, and considering competing ethical perspectives (**Step 3**).

At **Step 4 (scholarly and objective presentation without endorsement)**, educators can frame discussions of harm, responsibility, and moral obligation in an analytic and exploratory manner—presenting multiple ethical frameworks, surfacing disagreement, and avoiding signaling that a particular conclusion is required. When handled this way, Step 4 can be satisfied at the level of instructional framing and discussion.

The proposal nonetheless raises concerns at **Step 5 (reasonable perception of advocacy)** when concepts such as “being an upstander” are presented as a settled moral expectation rather than as a subject of ethical inquiry. Framing silence as inherently blameworthy, or positioning particular judgments about harm and responsibility as markers of moral maturity, risks resolving contested ethical questions through institutional authority. A reasonable student or family could perceive that certain moral conclusions are endorsed by the school, while alternative frameworks for thinking about harm, restraint, and responsibility are treated as ethically deficient.

This breakdown does not suggest that moral education or the cultivation of empathy is inappropriate. Rather, it signals the need to revise instructional framing so that students are invited to examine competing moral perspectives and to understand disagreement about harm and responsibility as a feature of ethical life. As in other cases, the distinction illustrates a core feature of viewpoint-neutral education: **scholarly neutrality of presentation (Step 4) is necessary but not sufficient when instructional expectations or moral framings themselves communicate endorsement on a contested question (Step 5).**

Application of Standards

Under the standards:

- Students may engage with ethical questions about responsibility, harm, and community.
- Educators may encourage empathy and concern for others.
- Instruction should distinguish between identifying conduct that violates shared school norms and resolving broader moral judgments about harm that remain contested.
- Educators should avoid framing contested ethical conclusions—including judgments about harm, responsibility, or moral obligation—as settled truths students are expected to adopt.

An appropriate approach invites students to explore competing moral frameworks and to understand disagreement about harm and responsibility as a feature of ethical life, while reinforcing norms of respect, care, and good faith engagement within the school community.

Case Study 4: Law Enforcement, Public Safety, and Symbolic Messaging

A high school social studies class includes a unit on public safety, policing, and democratic accountability. Students study the legal authority of police departments, the goals of public safety, and the importance of public trust in state institutions.

As part of the unit, the teacher invites two guest speakers:

- a police officer, who describes their professional experience and also advocates for a “Back the Blue” position, emphasizing the risks officers face and the need for public support; and
- a community activist, who describes their experience working with communities affected by policing and also advocates for “Defund the Police,” emphasizing harm to civilians and the need to reallocate resources.

Both speakers ground their perspectives in lived experience and speak passionately about their views.

Educational Merits

The use of guest speakers reflects several legitimate educational aims:

- making abstract civic issues concrete through lived experience;
- exposing students to contrasting perspectives on public safety;
- modeling civil disagreement on a contentious issue; and
- engaging students with real-world moral and political debate.

Presenting opposing viewpoints can help students see that reasonable people with direct experience disagree about how to understand harm, responsibility, and legitimacy. That said, lived experience is an input to inquiry, not a substitute for it.

Assessing Where Heightened Attention to Neutrality Is Required

While some factual aspects of policing can be studied empirically, the central questions raised by the speakers—how to balance safety and accountability and how to allocate public resources—are not empirically resolvable. There is no settled scholarly or societal consensus on these matters, which remain actively contested and closely tied to ethical and political conviction.

Importantly, the presence of opposing viewpoints does not, by itself, resolve the need for neutrality. Both “Back the Blue” and “Defund the Police” are advocacy positions that reflect particular moral frameworks and policy prescriptions. The disagreement between them concerns what counts as harm, whose risks matter most, and what responsibilities the state has toward different groups.

Taken together, these considerations indicate that the unit engages live, contested questions, requiring careful instructional framing even when multiple perspectives are presented.

Why This Matters for Student-Centered Open Inquiry

When advocacy positions—whether presented by one speaker or by two opposing speakers—are left unexamined, students may experience them as the only available answers rather than as claims to be analyzed. In this context, balance alone is not sufficient to support inquiry. Without explicit analytic framing, students may:

- feel pressure to choose a side rather than examine underlying assumptions;
- treat lived experience as settling contested moral (or even empirical) questions; or
- infer that the goal of the lesson is alignment rather than understanding.

By contrast, student-centered open inquiry is supported when educators explicitly frame guest speakers’ perspectives as starting points for analysis. This includes examining:

- what each speaker takes to be harmful and why;
- what evidence or assumptions underlie their claims;
- what alternative perspectives or pieces of evidence are not represented; and
- how scholars, courts, and policymakers have approached similar questions.

In this way, lived experience enriches inquiry without closing it.

Flow Chart Lens

Applying the Instruction Flow Chart in Appendix C helps clarify where this proposal requires heightened care and professional judgment.

The subject matter—public safety, policing, and democratic accountability—is academically relevant and appropriately situated within a high school social studies curriculum (**Step 2**). High school students are developmentally capable of engaging with abstract arguments, weighing competing evidence, and analyzing normative trade-offs (**Step 3**).

At **Step 4 (scholarly and objective presentation without endorsement)**, the use of guest speakers with contrasting perspectives can support inquiry if their views are explicitly framed as positions to be examined rather than conclusions to be adopted. With appropriate preparatory context and follow-up analysis, Step 4 can be satisfied at the level of instructional design.

The unit nonetheless raises concerns at **Step 5 (reasonable perception of advocacy)** if advocacy positions expressed by guest speakers are not subjected to analytic framing and comparison. When passionate advocacy is presented without sufficient structure, a reasonable student or family could perceive that the school is implicitly endorsing one or both positions, or that the purpose of the lesson is alignment rather than critical examination. Balance alone does not neutralize this risk; without analytic scaffolding, lived experience can function as an authoritative signal rather than as evidence for inquiry.

This breakdown does not suggest that guest speakers or lived experience should be avoided. Rather, it signals the need to ensure that instructional structure makes clear that advocacy positions are objects of analysis, not outcomes of learning. As in other cases, the distinction illustrates a core feature of viewpoint-neutral education: **scholarly neutrality of presentation (Step 4) is necessary but not sufficient when the structure of an activity allows advocacy to function as authoritative endorsement on a contested question (Step 5).**

Application of Standards

Under the standards:

- Educators may invite guest speakers to share perspectives grounded in lived experience.
- Guest speakers may express viewpoints, including advocacy positions, related to contested public issues.
- Instruction should make clear that such viewpoints are not conclusions for students to adopt, but perspectives to be examined critically and alongside other evidence and viewpoints.
- Educators should provide analytic structure—through discussion, comparison, and additional sources—so that students are not asked to resolve contested questions by deference to experience alone.

A developmentally appropriate approach treats lived experience as an essential input to inquiry while preserving students' freedom to reason independently about contested moral and political questions.

Case Study 5: Migration, Safety, and Community Support in Early Childhood

An early childhood classroom develops a unit on butterfly migration, which expands to include discussion of human migration. Students explore why people move, the challenges families may face, and the importance of kindness, empathy, and helping others in times of stress.

As part of the project, the class proposes several activities:

- creating drawings or messages offering encouragement to families experiencing hardship;

- assembling kits that include whistles, accompanied by a short pamphlet explaining how whistles can be used as a community warning system in response to immigration enforcement activity; and
- distributing these materials as a way of “helping people stay safe.”

Project materials and communications reference contemporary immigration enforcement agencies and practices.

Educational Merits

Several elements of the project are well aligned with early childhood pedagogy and Lab’s mission:

- studying migration through science and social studies;
- drawing concrete connections between animal migration and human movement;
- reinforcing universal norms such as kindness, empathy, and care for others; and
- engaging students through tangible, hands-on activities appropriate to their developmental stage.

These components support student-centered learning and allow young students to engage meaningfully with complex human experiences in concrete, accessible ways.

Assessing Where Heightened Attention To Neutrality Is Required

Applying the Committee’s guidepost questions helps clarify the nature of the issue.

While migration patterns can be studied empirically, the enforcement of immigration law and appropriate community responses to it are not questions with purely empirical answers. There is no settled scholarly or societal consensus on these matters; they remain actively contested across legal, political, and moral dimensions. Immigration enforcement is also a developing and highly politicized issue, closely tied to deeply held ethical and political convictions. Taken together, these features indicate that heightened attention to neutrality and restraint are required.

Why This Matters for Child-Centered Open Inquiry

Because early learners reason primarily through concrete examples, activities, symbols, and tools carry strong implicit messages. In this context, the inclusion of whistles, which have a commonly-understood political meaning in the contemporary context, and instructional materials framed as responses to immigration enforcement, while perhaps intended to instill empathy and caring for those suffering aggressive enforcement, also conveys an orthodox view on a contested issue. It makes a contested moral and political judgment concrete: that certain government actions are threats requiring organized community response. Rather than simply modeling a universal norm, this framing communicates to students that only certain viewpoints on a contested question are acceptable.

Flow Chart Lens

Applying the Instruction Flow Chart in **Appendix C** helps clarify where this proposal requires heightened professional care and judgment.

The topic of migration is academically relevant and appropriately situated within the curriculum (**Step 2**). With careful framing, discussion of why people move and the challenges families may face can be developmentally appropriate and grounded in shared human experiences and universal norms (**Step 3**).

At **Step 4 (scholarly and objective presentation without endorsement)**, the unit could plausibly be presented in a neutral and descriptive manner at the level of classroom discussion. An educator may be able to use careful language, avoid signaling personal views, and frame migration as a human phenomenon without endorsing particular policy positions. In this sense, Step 4 can be satisfied with respect to verbal instruction and discussion.

The unit nonetheless breaks down at **Step 5 (reasonable perception of advocacy)**. The inclusion of whistles and materials explicitly framed as responses to contemporary immigration enforcement introduces concrete, action-oriented symbols that are widely associated with a particular political judgment about a live, contested issue. Regardless of students' age or the neutrality of verbal framing, such tools function in practice as political advocacy on a controversial issue. A reasonable student or family could therefore perceive the activity as requiring students to take one side in a contested moral and political question.

This breakdown does not indicate that the underlying educational goals are inappropriate. Rather, it signals the need to revise the activity so that concrete classroom practices model universal norms of care without embedding advocacy or contested judgments in instructional tools or actions. The distinction illustrates an important feature of viewpoint-neutral education: **scholarly neutrality of presentation (Step 4) is necessary but not sufficient when materials or activities themselves carry authoritative political meaning (Step 5)**.

Application of Standards

Under the standards:

- Teaching about migration and human movement is appropriate, including developmentally appropriate discussion of why people move and the challenges families may face.
- Modeling universal norms is appropriate, including kindness, empathy, and care for others, and providing students with concrete ways to express support (e.g., drawings, messages, or other age-appropriate expressions of welcome and concern).
- Instruction should distinguish between helping and advocacy. Educators should avoid activities that make a contested political or moral conclusion concrete for young learners through symbols, tools, slogans, or action-oriented materials tied to ongoing public controversies.
- When an issue is plausibly contemporarily contested, heightened attention to neutrality is required. This concern is particularly visible in early childhood settings, but applies whenever instructional materials or activities risk resolving contested moral or political judgments through authoritative symbols or actions rather than inquiry.
- A developmentally appropriate approach keeps the focus on shared human experiences (movement, belonging, helping) and on universal norms of care, while preserving openness about contested questions and avoiding classroom activities that effectively answer those questions for students, rather than inviting open inquiry.

Case Study 6: Literature Curriculum

An English department undertakes a review of its literature curriculum. Faculty agree that the curriculum should be rigorous, engaging, and responsive to the experiences of a diverse student body.

In discussing revisions, several goals are proposed:

- increasing the diversity of authors and characters represented, including by race, gender, nationality, and historical period;
- ensuring students encounter texts that reflect a wide range of human experiences;
- helping students develop analytical reading and writing skills;
- cultivating artistic judgment and appreciation of literary form; and
- familiarizing students with works widely regarded as important or influential in literary traditions.

As deliberations continue, disagreement emerges about how these goals should be prioritized and how texts should be selected.

Some proposals emphasize explicit normative aims—such as selecting texts that challenge dominant narratives, promote social justice, or foreground experiences of marginalization. Other proposals emphasize disciplinary aims—such as literary craftsmanship, historical influence, genre coverage, and opportunities for close reading and analytical writing—while still supporting a broad and inclusive set of literary works.

Educational Merits

All participants share legitimate educational commitments:

- broadening students' exposure to literature beyond a narrow canon;
- ensuring students see literature as relevant to both human experience and their own lives;
- developing students' analytical, interpretive, and writing skills; and
- treating literature as an art form worthy of serious study.

Disagreements arise not from indifference to these goals, but from differing judgments about how they should be balanced and operationalized.

Assessing Where Heightened Attention to Neutrality Is Required

While some factual questions about literature—such as authorship, historical context, and influence—can be addressed empirically, many literary works themselves engage contested social, moral, and political questions, either explicitly or through narrative perspective, characterization, and thematic emphasis. Decisions about curriculum selection therefore involve not only judgments about representation and quality, but also judgments about which contested questions students will encounter, how those questions are framed, and what kinds of responses are made salient or intelligible.

There is no settled scholarly or societal consensus on how literature curricula should balance representational diversity, aesthetic value, historical significance, contemporary relevance, and engagement with social critique. Nor is there agreement about how directly literature instruction should invite moral or political evaluation, as opposed to analysis of form, ambiguity, and interpretive disagreement. These questions remain actively debated within literary studies, education, and the broader public, and they are closely tied to differing views about the purposes of literary education and the role of schools in addressing contested social issues.

Taken together, these considerations indicate that curriculum design in this area engages contested educational values, calling for care in how instructional aims are framed for students.

Why This Matters for Student-Centered Open Inquiry

Students learn not only from what they are taught, but from how the curriculum implicitly frames its purposes. When educators present a literature curriculum as advancing a single, settled normative goal—such as promoting a particular conception of social justice, moral responsibility, or political critique—we are telling students what literature is for, rather than inviting them to examine multiple ways literature can be understood and valued.

Literature has often been used to critique social arrangements, expose injustice, and advocate for moral or political change, and learning about those uses is an important and legitimate part of literary education. The concern is not that literature addresses contested social issues, but how it is used instructionally. Two related but distinct problems can arise.

First, literature selection and instruction can be used to establish a normative orthodoxy. This happens when a sequence of texts is designed to point students toward a particular moral or political conclusion, and that normative work is delivered implicitly rather than examined explicitly. In such cases, students are not invited to assess arguments, weigh alternatives, or consider competing interpretations; instead, they are guided toward an answer. This undermines student-centered open inquiry and viewpoint diversity by resolving contested questions in advance.

Second, this approach can leave students with a distorted understanding of what literature is for. When texts are presented primarily as vehicles for moral or political instruction, students may infer that literature's only or central purpose is to model correct ethical or social conclusions. Other legitimate ways of engaging literature—such as attending to form, ambiguity, aesthetic judgment, historical influence, or interpretive disagreement—may receive less emphasis or be implicitly devalued. This narrows students' conception of literary study itself, not just their conclusions about particular social issues.

Together, these effects limit inquiry twice over: by closing off disagreement about contested social questions, and by constraining students' understanding of the aims and possibilities of literary interpretation.

By contrast, a curriculum that is diverse in authorship and experience while also explicit about multiple disciplinary aims preserves openness. In such a curriculum, literature is not treated as a delivery system for predetermined moral conclusions, but as a complex body of work that invites sustained inquiry.

Students are asked not only to consider what a text says about social life, but how it makes its case; what assumptions, values, and narrative strategies it relies on; why reasonable readers disagree about its meanings and implications; and whether its normative claims are persuasive, incomplete, or open to challenge.

A literature curriculum need not choose between social engagement and disciplinary rigor. Literature can be studied as art, as historical artifact, as cultural intervention, and as a site of moral and political reflection. When instruction attends to form, ambiguity, voice, genre, and interpretive disagreement alongside social critique, students learn that literature can illuminate contested questions without resolving them in advance. In this way, literary study models inquiry rather than assent and preserves space for judgment rather than prescribing conclusions.

Flow Chart Lens

Applying the Instruction Flow Chart in Appendix C helps clarify where this curriculum review requires heightened care and professional judgment.

Curriculum selection in literature is academically central and appropriately situated within middle and high school education (**Step 2**). Students at these levels are developmentally capable of engaging with complex texts, interpreting ambiguity, and examining contested moral and social questions through analysis and discussion (**Step 3**).

At **Step 4 (scholarly and objective presentation without endorsement)**, it is possible to design a literature curriculum that introduces contested themes and perspectives in a neutral, analytic manner—making explicit that texts can be read, valued, and interpreted in multiple ways. When educators clearly signal that reasonable scholars disagree about both literary interpretation and the aims of literary study itself, Step 4 can be satisfied at the level of instructional framing.

Concerns arise at **Step 5 (reasonable perception of advocacy)** when curriculum design implicitly treats literature as serving a single, settled normative or ideological purpose. When text selection, sequencing, or framing consistently points students toward particular moral or political conclusions—without making those aims explicit objects of inquiry—a reasonable student or family could perceive that the school is endorsing a specific worldview rather than inviting interpretive judgment. In such cases, the curriculum itself functions as an authoritative resolution of contested questions rather than as a site of inquiry.

This breakdown does not suggest that literature addressing injustice, identity, or social critique should be avoided. Rather, it signals the need to ensure that curricular aims are plural and transparent, and that students are invited to examine competing understandings of what literature is for. As in other cases, the distinction illustrates a core feature of viewpoint-neutral education: **scholarly neutrality of presentation (Step 4) is necessary but not sufficient when curricular structure or framing itself communicates endorsement on contested questions (Step 5)**.

Application of Standards

Under the standards:

- Students may study a wide range of literary texts from diverse authors, traditions, genres, and historical periods.
- Educators may pursue multiple educational aims in literature instruction, including representational breadth, development of analytical reading and writing skills, cultivation of aesthetic judgment, and familiarity with influential literary works broadly conceived.
- Curriculum design should avoid framing literature selection as serving a single, settled normative or ideological purpose, whether moral, political, or social.
- Educators should make explicit that reasonable scholars and educators disagree about the aims of literary study and about how particular texts should be interpreted, valued, and taught, and should invite students into that disagreement through analysis, comparison, and interpretation.

An appropriate approach presents literature as a domain of inquiry in which diversity of texts supports—rather than replaces—diversity of interpretation, judgment, and critical engagement.

Case Study 7: Environmental Solutions, Technology, and Competing Visions

A high school environmental studies course examines climate change, emissions, and resource use. Students analyze scientific evidence, economic models, and historical responses to environmental challenges.

During discussion, different students advance contrasting views:

- some argue that meaningful environmental progress depends primarily on changes in individual behavior and consumption;
- others argue that focusing on personal behavior is a distraction and that large-scale policy interventions matter most; and
- others contend that technological innovation and accelerated economic growth will ultimately solve environmental problems more effectively than short-run restraint or regulation.

As the unit develops, the teacher considers whether to frame one of these approaches as the most responsible or realistic path forward.

Educational Merits

The course engages students in:

- serious analysis of empirical evidence and uncertainty;
- exposure to multiple explanatory frameworks;
- examination of trade-offs among economic growth, innovation, regulation, and behavioral change; and
- development of students' capacity to reason about complex, high-stakes public problems.

High school students are developmentally capable of engaging these questions with increasing abstraction and independence.

Assessing Where Heightened Attention to Neutrality Is Required

While aspects of environmental change can be studied empirically, disagreements about solutions—such as behavioral restraint, policy intervention, market incentives, or technological acceleration—are not empirically settled. There is no strong scholarly or societal consensus on which approach is primary or sufficient, because these choices require normative judgments about how to balance competing values and risks. Reasonable people disagree about how to weigh short-term costs against long-term benefits, individual responsibility against collective action, economic growth against environmental protection, and present needs against intergenerational obligations.

These debates remain actively contested and are closely tied to moral judgments about responsibility, risk tolerance, inequality, uncertainty, and trade-offs under conditions of incomplete information. Accordingly, instruction in this area requires careful neutrality and openness—not because the issues lack moral importance, but because the moral work consists precisely in reasoning about competing priorities rather than applying a settled answer.

Why This Matters for Student-Centered Open Inquiry

When educators frame one approach—whether personal stewardship, policy intervention, or technological acceleration—as *the* answer, we are telling students how to resolve a contested public question rather than inviting them to reason through it. In doing so, we short-circuit the very work the topic requires: weighing competing values, risks, and priorities under conditions of uncertainty.

By contrast, presenting these approaches as competing responses—each with strengths, limits, and trade-offs—supports genuine inquiry. Students learn not only environmental science and facts, but how reasonable people disagree about solutions and values, why those disagreements persist, and how to assess evidence, assumptions, and normative trade-offs critically. In this way, instruction preserves students' role as independent reasoners rather than positioning them as recipients of a settled answer.

Flow Chart Lens

Applying the Instruction Flow Chart in Appendix C helps clarify where this instructional decision requires heightened care and professional judgment.

The subject matter—environmental science, policy responses, and technological pathways—is academically central and appropriately situated within a high school curriculum (**Step 2**). High school students are developmentally capable of engaging with complex evidence, uncertainty, and competing normative frameworks (**Step 3**).

At **Step 4 (scholarly and objective presentation without endorsement)**, the course can be structured to examine multiple approaches to environmental challenges in a neutral and analytic manner. When the educator frames each approach as a hypothesis or framework to be evaluated—rather than as a conclusion to be endorsed—Step 4 can be satisfied through careful instructional design and discussion.

Concerns arise at **Step 5 (reasonable perception of advocacy)** if the teacher frames one approach as the most responsible, realistic, or morally required path forward. Even absent explicit advocacy or action-oriented assignments, such framing can function as an authoritative resolution of a contested public question. A reasonable student or family could perceive that a particular normative judgment about responsibility and risk is being endorsed by the school rather than examined through inquiry.

This breakdown does not suggest that educators must withhold judgment or moral seriousness from classroom discussion. Rather, it signals the need to preserve analytic openness by treating competing approaches as objects of evaluation and debate, not as answers to be supplied by instructional authority. As in other cases, the distinction illustrates a core feature of viewpoint-neutral education: **scholarly neutrality of presentation (Step 4) is necessary but not sufficient when instructional framing itself resolves a contested question for students (Step 5).**

Application of Standards

Under the standards:

- Students may study environmental science, policy, economics, and technological innovation as interconnected domains.
- Competing views about responsibility, risk, and solutions should be presented as objects of analysis rather than as conclusions students are expected to adopt.
- Educators should avoid framing any single approach as the morally or intellectually required position on contested questions.
- Instruction should support students in evaluating evidence, assumptions, uncertainties, values, and trade-offs across perspectives.

A viewpoint-neutral approach preserves space for students to develop their own reasoned judgments about how environmental challenges should be understood and addressed.

Case Study 8: Identity, Affinity Spaces, and LAB Fest Programming

A middle school program is developed with the goals of promoting belonging, dialogue, and reflection on identity. Proposed components include:

- affinity spaces organized around race, religion, gender, and other aspects of identity;
- advisory lessons focused on concepts such as intersectionality, privilege, systems of power, and bias; and
- workshops and activities that culminate in forms of advocacy, such as writing to lawmakers, organizing campaigns, or publicly “sharing one’s voice.”

Program materials describe these concepts as central frameworks for understanding social life and personal identity and, in many cases, present them as foundational rather than as perspectives to be examined.

Educational Merits

The program reflects several legitimate educational aims:

- supporting students’ sense of belonging and dignity;
- encouraging empathy and perspective-taking;
- helping students reflect on their own experiences and identities; and
- engaging students with issues they encounter in their communities and the wider world.

These goals are consistent with Lab’s mission and with the developmental stage of middle school students, who are increasingly able to reflect on social relationships, difference, and fairness.

Assessing Where Attention to Heightened Neutrality Is Required

Applying the Committee’s guideposts helps clarify the nature of the issues raised by the program.

While aspects of identity, inequality, and social outcomes can be studied empirically, many of the central questions the program raises—about causation, responsibility, and appropriate responses—are not resolvable by evidence alone. There is no settled scholarly or societal consensus on frameworks such as privilege, intersectionality, or systems of power; these approaches are influential but contested within academic scholarship and public debate. The concepts are also closely tied to ongoing cultural and political disputes and are frequently mobilized in contemporary advocacy. Finally, the issues involve deeply held moral and political convictions about justice, responsibility, and social change.

Taken together, these considerations indicate that the topics addressed by the program involve live, contested questions that call for heightened attention to neutrality and care in how they are presented.

Why This Matters for Student-Centered Open Inquiry

When educators present particular conceptual frameworks as foundational truths—rather than as lenses for analysis—we are telling students that those frameworks are the correct way to understand themselves and others. In this context, instructional sequences that move quickly from introducing a framework to inviting personal identification with it, or to engaging in advocacy based on it, risk narrowing the space for inquiry. Rather than inviting students to examine multiple ways scholars and communities understand identity and social life, the program may implicitly resolve contested questions in advance.

Over time, this can limit students’ willingness to question, test, or explore alternative interpretations, undermining the goal of fostering independent thinking and reasoned disagreement.

Flow Chart Lens

Applying the Instruction Flow Chart in Appendix C helps clarify where this proposal requires heightened care and professional judgment.

The topics addressed by the program—identity, inequality, and social relationships—are academically relevant and appropriately situated within a middle school context (**Step 2**). Middle school students are

developmentally capable of engaging with abstract concepts and of reflecting on social experience when instruction is carefully framed (**Step 3**).

At **Step 4 (scholarly and objective presentation without endorsement)**, it is possible to introduce frameworks such as privilege or intersectionality in a neutral and analytic manner—presenting them as influential perspectives within scholarship rather than as settled truths. With careful language and explicit signaling that reasonable scholars disagree, Step 4 can be satisfied at the level of instructional framing.

The proposal nonetheless raises concerns at **Step 5 (reasonable perception of advocacy)**. When school-sponsored programming treats particular, contested frameworks as foundational to personal identity or understanding social life, or when activities culminate in advocacy as the expected outcome of learning, the program resolves contested moral and political questions through institutional authority rather than inquiry. A reasonable student or family could perceive that certain interpretations and responses are endorsed by the school, while alternative perspectives are marginalized or rendered unintelligible.

This breakdown does not indicate that the subject matter is inappropriate. Rather, it signals the need to revise program design so that contested frameworks are presented as objects of examination, comparison, and critique—and so that participation, reflection, and connection are not coupled with expectations of advocacy or ideological alignment. The case illustrates an important feature of viewpoint-neutral education: **scholarly neutrality of presentation (Step 4) is necessary but not sufficient when program structure or outcomes themselves signal endorsement (Step 5).**

Application of Standards

Under the standards:

- Students may study identity, culture, inequality, and social movements.
- Influential frameworks such as privilege or intersectionality may be introduced as tools for analysis.
- Instruction should clearly signal that such frameworks are subject to examination, critique, and comparison with other perspectives.
- School-sponsored programming should avoid positioning advocacy as the expected or required outcome of learning on contested issues.
- Affinity spaces and related activities should be structured to support reflection and connection without presuming a particular ideological stance.
- Affinity spaces and related activities must be structured so that participation is neither explicitly nor implicitly restricted on the basis of race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, or other protected characteristics, consistent with the School's legal obligations.

An appropriate approach preserves space for multiple perspectives, reinforces norms of respect and inclusion, and allows students to engage contested ideas without being positioned inside a single explanatory framework.

Case Study 9: Physical Space and Symbolic Expression

Adults have placed visible symbols in shared spaces such as classrooms, hallways, and offices. These include posters, flags, and signs associated with contemporary social, political, or religious movements. Some displays are intended to signal solidarity, inclusion, or moral opposition to perceived injustice.

Students encounter these symbols daily as part of the school’s physical environment. Some students and families experience the displays as affirming and supportive; others experience them as communicating a particular political or moral viewpoint they do not share.

Educational Merits

The motivations behind these displays often reflect legitimate and admirable aims:

- expressing care for students’ dignity and well-being;
- affirming that students from diverse backgrounds belong at the school;
- responding to moments of social stress or public controversy; and
- modeling moral seriousness and engagement with the world.

Creating an environment in which students feel safe, respected, and included is a core educational responsibility.

Assessing Where Heightened Attention to Neutrality Is Required

While the equal dignity and worth of students is a shared and settled commitment, many of the symbols used to express that commitment are closely associated with contemporary political movements and contested public debates. There is no settled scholarly or societal consensus on the full range of meanings, policy implications, or moral claims associated with these symbols. They remain actively politicized and are widely understood as signaling alignment with particular viewpoints.

Moreover, because these displays are placed by adults and encountered by students in school settings, they risk establishing an orthodoxy based on authority rather than inviting inquiry. Students encounter them as part of “what the school stands for.” Taken together, these features indicate that heightened neutrality is required in adult-initiated symbolic expression in shared school spaces.

Why This Matters for Student-Centered Open Inquiry

Physical space teaches, even when no lesson is being delivered. When adults use school spaces to display symbols associated with contested political or moral positions, we are communicating—without dialogue or analysis—that a particular viewpoint is expected or endorsed.

Unlike instructional materials that are framed, contextualized, and critically examined, such displays typically do not invite inquiry. For students who share the viewpoint being expressed, the symbols may feel affirming; for students who do not, they may signal that their perspectives are disfavored or unwelcome. In either case, the effect is to narrow the space for independent thought by establishing an implicit orthodoxy outside the context of instruction. This is problematic for the intellectual development of all students' capacity for rigorous inquiry, whether at the moment they happen to agree or disagree with the position staked out by the display.

This concern is not about the moral worth of the causes represented. It is about the role of the school and the authority of adults in shaping an environment where students must be free to think, question, and disagree.

Flow Chart Lens

Because this case concerns adult-initiated symbolic expression in shared school spaces rather than instructional content, it is properly evaluated using the Environment Flow Chart in Appendix C.

These displays are not presented as objects of inquiry and are encountered by students as part of the school's physical and institutional environment. As a result, they do not operate through scholarly presentation or analytic framing. Instead, their meaning arises from repeated exposure in spaces shaped by adult authority.

Concerns therefore arise at **Step 2 (reasonable perception of endorsement)** of the Environment Flow Chart. Symbols closely associated with contemporary political or moral movements can reasonably be perceived by students or families as signaling institutional alignment with a particular viewpoint on a contested issue. Unlike classroom materials framed for inquiry, such displays are not contextualized, examined, or debated, and therefore function as authoritative signals rather than invitations to think.

This breakdown does not suggest that schools should be neutral about student dignity or belonging. Rather, it underscores the need to distinguish between commitments that must be expressed institutionally—such as safety, respect, and equal treatment—and contested political or moral judgments that should remain open to inquiry. As in other cases, the core concern is not intent but effect: when shared environments communicate endorsement on contested questions through authority rather than inquiry, viewpoint neutrality is compromised.

Application of Standards

Under the standards:

- Shared school spaces should not be used to communicate adult endorsement of contested political or moral viewpoints.
- Adult-initiated displays should avoid symbols, slogans, or imagery closely associated with contemporary political movements or advocacy positions.

- Commitments to student dignity, safety, and inclusion should be expressed through school policies, practices, and interpersonal conduct rather than through symbolic political messaging in shared spaces.
- Contested issues may be engaged pedagogically within classrooms—including with classroom displays—when presented with appropriate context, balance, and opportunity for inquiry.

The appropriate approach distinguishes between welcoming all students, which is non-negotiable, and using institutional space to signal particular political conclusions, which undermines open inquiry.

Case Study 10: Student-Created Protest Art and Public Display

An art class includes a unit on protest art, examining historical and contemporary examples of artists who have used visual media to express dissent, critique injustice, or advocate for social change. Students study the formal elements of protest art, its historical contexts, and the relationship between art and political movements.

As part of the unit, students are asked to create their own protest signs addressing an issue they care about. The assignment emphasizes visual design, symbolism, and message clarity.

When the projects are completed, the teacher proposes displaying the signs in a prominent hallway or common area. All of the student-created signs turn out to reflect positions on the same side of a contemporary contested issue.

Educational Merits

The unit reflects several legitimate educational aims:

- studying an important artistic genre with deep historical roots;
- helping students analyze how visual form conveys meaning and emotion;
- supporting student voice and creative expression; and
- engaging students with the relationship between art and social life.

Student-created work can be a powerful way to deepen engagement and develop artistic judgment.

Assessing Where Heightened Attention to Neutrality Is Required

The study of protest art as a genre is appropriate and educationally valuable. The political and moral issues addressed in the students' work, however, remain actively contested. Reasonable people disagree about the underlying questions and about how societies should respond to them.

In this context, two distinct considerations arise.

First, educators should reflect on whether the conditions of the assignment genuinely supported student-centered open inquiry. When an assignment invites advocacy on a contested issue, and when student work converges on a single position, it is important to consider whether instructional framing, exemplar selection, teacher authority, or peer dynamics made alternative viewpoints difficult to articulate

or even to imagine. Convergence alone is not evidence of independent agreement; it may signal that inquiry narrowed prematurely.

Second, even when the classroom conditions support independent student judgment, the decision to display student work in shared school spaces raises a separate concern. When student-created protest messages are displayed collectively and without analytic context, they may function less as evidence of inquiry and more as a settled message presented by the school environment itself. Viewers might encounter the work without explanation, invitation to question, or indication that reasonable disagreement exists. Displaying uniform advocacy in those spaces risks communicating that a particular position has been resolved for the community, even if the instructional process that produced the work was open and reflective.

Taken together, these considerations indicate that heightened care is required both in the design of advocacy-oriented assignments and in decisions about how, where, and whether student work is publicly displayed.

Why This Matters for Student-Centered Open Inquiry

Student-centered open inquiry depends on two related conditions: that students have genuine space to arrive at their own judgments, and that the school does not present contested questions as already resolved.

When an assignment invites advocacy on a contested issue, the convergence of student work on a single position raises an important question—not about intent, but about process. Students are highly sensitive to cues from teachers, peers, exemplars, and classroom norms about what is expected, valued, or acceptable. In such settings, uniformity may reflect independent agreement, but it may also reflect subtle guidance, signaling, or social pressure that narrowed the range of views students felt able to express or even to consider.

Even when the instructional conditions support independent judgment, the collective presentation of student advocacy can further shape meaning. When student-created protest messages are displayed together and without analytic framing, they may function less as evidence of inquiry and more as a settled answer presented by the school environment. Viewers might encounter the work without indication that reasonable disagreement exists or that the underlying questions remain open.

In either case, the risk is the same: contested questions are resolved implicitly rather than examined explicitly. The effect is to shift the activity from inquiry into conformity—not because advocacy is illegitimate, but because students' role as independent reasoners is displaced by the authority of collective presentation.

Flow Chart Lens

This case implicates **both flow charts** in Appendix C at different stages of the activity.

Instruction Flow Chart (Assignment Design).

The study of protest art and the creation of student work are academically relevant and appropriately situated within an art curriculum (**Step 2**). Students at this level are developmentally capable of engaging with symbolism, political expression, and contested social questions through artistic inquiry (**Step 3**).

At **Step 4 (scholarly and objective presentation without endorsement)**, an advocacy-oriented assignment can still support inquiry if it is framed to encourage exploration of multiple perspectives, careful reflection, and critical examination of how protest art functions. However, concerns arise at **Step 5 (reasonable perception of advocacy)** when assignment design, exemplars, or classroom dynamics make alternative viewpoints difficult to articulate or signal that particular positions are expected or valued. In such cases, a reasonable student could perceive that advocacy is the outcome of learning rather than an object of inquiry.

Environment Flow Chart (Public Display).

The proposed display of student-created protest signs in shared school spaces raises a separate concern under the Environment Flow Chart. Because the display is not framed for analysis and is encountered as part of the school's physical environment, it does not invite inquiry. When all displayed messages reflect a single viewpoint on a contested issue, a reasonable student or family could perceive the display as communicating a settled institutional position (**Step 2: reasonable perception of endorsement**).

These breakdowns do not suggest that protest art should be excluded from instruction or that student expression should be suppressed. Rather, they highlight the need to distinguish between supporting student expression within inquiry and presenting contested conclusions as settled through collective authority. As in other cases, the distinction illustrates a core feature of viewpoint-neutral education: **scholarly neutrality of presentation (Step 4) is necessary but not sufficient when assignment structure or public display communicates endorsement on a contested question (Step 5).**

Application of Standards

Under the standards:

- Studying protest art as a genre and inviting students to create work in that genre is appropriate.
- Student expression may include advocacy positions, provided that instructional design supports inquiry, reflection, and openness rather than prescribing conclusions or signaling preferred views.
- When assignments invite students to take positions on contested issues, educators should attend carefully to instructional framing, exemplars, and classroom dynamics to ensure that multiple perspectives can be explored without stigma or penalty.
- Decisions about publicly presenting student-created advocacy require additional care, particularly when the work reflects a single viewpoint on a contested issue.

In such cases, schools should consider whether and how to present the work in ways that preserve inquiry, such as:

- limiting display to contexts where discussion and analysis can be supported;
- providing contextual framing that makes clear the exploratory purpose of the assignment;

- incorporating reflective commentary; or
- using the work as a prompt for structured inquiry rather than as a declarative display.

The key is to distinguish between supporting student expression and presenting contested conclusions as settled through collective authority, preserving students' freedom to think independently even when engaging powerful forms of artistic and political expression.

Case Study 11: Personal Adornment, Identity, and Professional Authority

Educators come to school wearing a wide range of clothing and personal adornments, including items that express religious observance, cultural or ethnic identity, personal belief, or political commitment. Students encounter these expressions repeatedly as part of educators' professional presence. Some students experience particular symbols as affirming or familiar; others experience them as unfamiliar, confusing, or as signaling a viewpoint they do not share.

Educational Merits

Personal adornment can serve many legitimate functions:

- religious observance and conscience;
- expression of cultural or ethnic identity;
- affirmation of personal dignity and authenticity; and
- participation in civic or moral life.

Respecting religious freedom and cultural diversity is a core institutional commitment. Students benefit from seeing adults who model integrity and respect for difference.

Assessing Where Heightened Attention to Neutrality Is Required

Some forms of personal adornment—such as items worn primarily as religious observance or as markers of cultural or ethnic identity—do not, in themselves, resolve contested public questions or signal policy positions. They are best understood as expressions of identity or conscience rather than as advocacy, even when they intersect with broader social debates.

Other forms of adornment—particularly symbols, slogans, or imagery closely associated with contemporary political movements or advocacy campaigns—function differently. In the current context, such symbols are widely understood as expressing positions on live, contested political or moral questions. Reasonable people disagree not only about the underlying issues, but also about whether these symbols represent inclusion, protest, or policy advocacy.

When worn by educators in a professional setting, these symbols operate with authority rather than as private speech. Students are not invited to analyze or interrogate the message; they encounter it as part of the instructional environment.

Because the boundary between identity expression and advocacy is not always sharp, judgment is required. The relevant question is not whether a symbol has political implications in some abstract sense,

but whether, in its contemporary meaning and classroom context, it reasonably functions as endorsing one side of a contested public debate rather than as expressing identity or belief.

Why This Matters for Student-Centered Open Inquiry

Students experience educators not only through what they say, but through what they repeatedly and visibly present as normal, valued, or authoritative. When an educator’s attire or adornment functions as advocacy on a contested issue, it communicates—without dialogue or analytic framing—that certain positions are favored or expected.

For students who share the view, this may feel affirming; for students who do not, it may signal that their perspectives are disfavored or out of place. In either case, the effect is to narrow the space for independent thought by establishing an implicit orthodoxy outside the context of inquiry.

At the same time, treating all visible expressions of identity or belief as advocacy would undermine pluralism and chill legitimate and meaningful personal expression. Preserving student-centered open inquiry therefore requires distinguishing carefully between identity expression and uncontextualized advocacy, and recognizing that the same symbol may function differently depending on context, prevalence, and meaning.

Flow Chart Lens

Because this case concerns educators’ attire and personal adornment in professional settings rather than instructional content, it is properly evaluated using the **Environment Flow Chart** in Appendix C.

Personal adornment is encountered by students as part of the school’s everyday environment and carries meaning through repeated exposure in contexts shaped by adult authority. It is not framed for inquiry or presented as an object of analysis.

Concerns therefore arise at **Step 2 (reasonable perception of endorsement)** of the Environment Flow Chart. When clothing, accessories, or symbols are closely associated with contemporary political or social movements, a reasonable student or family could perceive that the educator—and by extension the school—is endorsing a particular viewpoint on a contested issue. This perception can arise even in the absence of explicit advocacy and regardless of the educator’s intent.

This breakdown does not suggest that educators should suppress all expressions of personal identity. Rather, it highlights the need to distinguish between who educators are—which students should respect—and what conclusions students are expected to reach—which must remain open to inquiry. As in other environment-based cases, the core concern is not intent but effect: **when professional presentation communicates endorsement on contested questions through authority rather than inquiry, viewpoint neutrality is compromised.**

Application of Standards

Under the standards:

- Educators retain full freedom of personal expression outside professional contexts.
- In professional settings, educators may wear attire and symbols associated with identity or observance, consistent with respect for pluralism and conscience.
- Educators should avoid wearing clothing, accessories, or adornments that, in their contemporary context, reasonably function as advocacy for one side of a live, contested political or social issue.
- When the status of a symbol is ambiguous or contested, educators should err on the side of restraint and seek guidance, recognizing that preserving open inquiry is a shared institutional responsibility.
- Commitments to student dignity, inclusion, and belonging should be communicated primarily through policies, practices, and interpersonal conduct, rather than through uncontextualized political signaling in professional presentation.

We strive to distinguish between who educators are, which students should respect, and what conclusions students are expected to reach, which must remain open to inquiry.

Appendix B: Compare-and-Contrast Examples

The following paired examples are intended to illustrate how similar activities can differ in important ways depending on how they are framed. In each pair, the first example is consistent with viewpoint-neutral, student-centered open inquiry; the second crosses into advocacy concerning a contested issue. These examples are illustrative, not exhaustive.

Helping Neighbors in Need vs. Advocating Against Policy Change

- A school organizes a food drive framed around helping neighbors who are experiencing food insecurity. Students learn that some families struggle to afford groceries and that communities often respond by sharing resources and offering support.
- A school organizes a food drive framed around opposition to proposed changes in SNAP benefits, with messaging that presents those policy changes as unjust and encourages families to protest them.

Distinction:

Helping people in need models a universal norm; framing the activity as opposition to a specific public policy presumes an answer to a contested policy question rather than leaving it open for inquiry.

Representation of Diverse Families vs. Moral Instruction on Religious Marriage

- A read-aloud story features children who live in a variety of family structures, including families with parents of the same sex and families with parents of different sexes. These families are presented as part of the children's everyday lives, without explicit commentary, evaluation, or moral argument.
- A read-aloud story features a same-sex couple seeking to be married and uses that narrative to frame certain religious practices around marriage as harmful, or to instruct students about how faith communities ought to understand or respond to same-sex marriage.

Distinction:

Representing the diversity of families students encounter in society and in school supports inclusion and reflects students' lived experience. Using that representation, by contrast, to instruct students about the moral status of religious beliefs or practices presumes a particular answer to a matter of personal conscience or conviction.

Environmental Care vs. Policy Advocacy

- Students learn about pollution and are encouraged to reduce waste in their classroom and school as a way of caring for shared spaces.
- Students are required to write letters to lawmakers advocating for a specific environmental regulation as the culmination of a unit.

Distinction:

Modeling care for the environment reflects shared norms; directing students toward specific policy solutions resolves contested questions prematurely.

Historical Judgment, Moral Exemplars, and Present-Day Contested Questions

- Students study the civil rights movement, examining major historical figures and their accomplishments. Instruction explores the historical context in which these individuals acted, the range of strategies and disagreements within the movement, the risks involved, and the reasons their actions are now widely regarded—through law, scholarship, and democratic consensus—as morally justified. Students are encouraged to examine how these judgments came to be established and to consider alternative interpretations of motives, methods, and consequences, even as racial segregation itself is taught as unjust.
- Students are encouraged to adopt contemporary activist positions as the expected outcome of studying civil rights history, with instruction framing present-day political or moral disputes as morally equivalent to past injustices and implying that morally serious people must take a particular stance now, even where those issues remain actively contested and unresolved.

Distinction:

Schools may teach some historical and moral judgments as settled for the purposes of instruction while remaining open to inquiry, evidence, and alternative perspectives. They should not resolve *present-day* contested questions for students by treating anticipated moral consensus as already achieved. Teaching how past judgments came to be regarded as just is different from instructing students which contemporary positions they must endorse.

Religious Literacy vs. Religious Instruction

- Students learn about different religious traditions, beliefs, texts, and practices as part of understanding history, culture, and human experience. Instruction situates these traditions in their historical and social contexts and explores how religious ideas have shaped art, politics, ethics, and everyday life.

- Instruction treats one religious tradition or set of beliefs as the authoritative framework for evaluating moral, social, or political questions, or encourages students to assess other perspectives primarily through that lens.

Distinction:

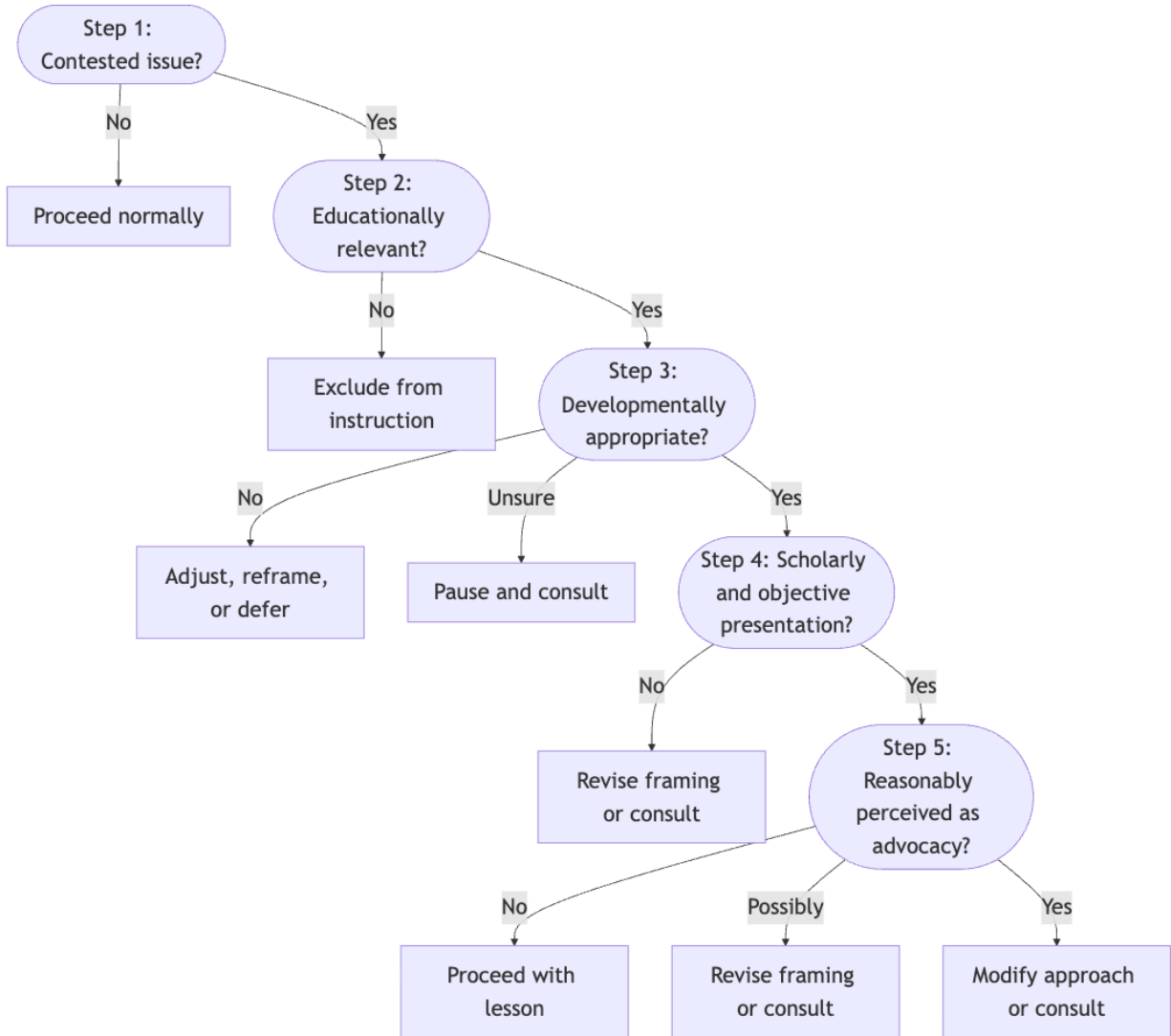
Studying religion as a subject of inquiry supports understanding and pluralism. Using religion as an evaluative authority in instruction resolves contested questions for students and shifts the classroom from inquiry to instruction in belief. The same distinction applies when teaching any comprehensive worldview: it may be studied and compared without being treated as authoritative.

Appendix C: Flow Charts

These flow charts are intended as guidance tools to support professional judgment and shared norms, not as checklists or documentation requirements. When questions arise, consultation and collaborative problem-solving are encouraged.

Instructional Flow Chart

For lessons, units, discussions, assignments, advisories, and activities



School Environment Flow Chart

For classroom displays, hallway displays, clothing, email signatures, and other adult-initiated expressions in professional contexts

