

St. George's School of Montreal
Statement of Commitments

May 15, 2024

Recent world events have sparked discussion and concerns within our community. These events are reflected locally, not just in protests and university encampments, but also in growing intolerance and acts of racism that leave many families in our community suffering and feeling vulnerable. We have heard from members of our community calling for clarification regarding how we are navigating the impacts of these events in our classrooms and on our campuses.

Our school's position is and must remain a pedagogical one, not a political one. And our pedagogy, rooted in empathy, understanding and respect, remains steadfast. We believe in empowering students to engage critically with diverse perspectives while instilling in them a deep sense of compassion and empathy for others.

To this end, we affirm the following principles which anchor our school's approach:

- 1. The inherent value of human life:** Calling for harm to any individual or group is unacceptable. Especially when engaging in expression and when differing viewpoints are expressed, the inherent value of all human life is the basic premise upon which all discussion must be based.
- 2. Support for our School Community:** Each member of our community deserves to feel valued and understood. Practically, this means that when members of our community are suffering, the school should be there to offer support.

We are horrified by the rise in incidents of antisemitism and Islamophobia, and stand strongly with the members of our community who are threatened by this tide of hatred. Pernicious stereotypes against these groups that we have spent decades – in some cases, centuries – refuting, are continuing to rear their ugly heads. With very good reason, members of these communities who have suffered generations of trauma need to understand that they are not alone.

- 3. Respect for Diversity:** All members of our school community are expected to respect diversity and not engage in any form of bullying, harassment, threats, intimidation or discrimination based on racialized identity, ethnicity, religious beliefs, nationality, skin colour, gender, gender identity, gender expression, neurodivergence, body diversity, physical disability, mental disability, ancestry, place of origin, family status or sexual orientation.

In these difficult times, and especially with the polarizing effects of social media, identifying discrimination can be more nuanced than usual. Our students, guided by our educators, should learn how to identify discriminatory speech, even when couched in political terms. We cannot tolerate the demonization of a people, or the denial of anyone's fundamental right to live in freedom, peace and security. Political solutions to these problems may be debated, but the moral imperative to respect the rights of others without discrimination is clear.

- 4. Reasoned Debate:** We encourage thoughtful and respectful discussions of complex issues. While acknowledging the right to freedom of expression, it's important to emphasize the responsibility of thoughtful speech. Encouraging students to consider not only what *can* be said, but also what *should* be said and *how*, fosters a deeper understanding of the impact of their words.

Students discussing sensitive issues should strive to understand diverse perspectives. They should open themselves to learning about historical discrimination and its contemporary impact, recognizing the sensitivities of others and themselves.

At the same time, listening to others' viewpoints requires recognizing the discomfort of disagreement. Our students should learn to navigate this discomfort in ways appropriate to their developmental stage. Creating a safe environment doesn't mean shielding students from differing opinions—to the contrary, we believe students grow emotionally and academically when they learn to manage diverse perspectives.

Our goal is to cultivate students who engage in positive and sensitive speech, who listen and seek to understand diverse viewpoints, and who approach debate from a foundation of shared humanity.

5. Freedom of Expression: None of the principles we elaborate is absolute, and freedom of expression is no exception. But the exchange of ideas is the lifeblood of academic institutions, and it is only in the rarest of cases that we will censor our students' expression. Our pedagogical imperative is to teach, not to prohibit.

6. Family Reflection: Learning is not confined to our school classrooms. We, the adults in the St. George's community, are models for our children. We cannot control or contain the horrors taking place around the world, but we can guide how our children understand their historical roots and place them in their larger worldview.

Most practically, we encourage caregivers to engage in open and constructive dialogue with their children about these principles. By encouraging thoughtful reflection and empathy, we aim to empower students to make responsible decisions that contribute positively to our school community.

With these principles in mind, the school has begun what will be an ongoing process of providing teachers with tools, resources and professional development related to important themes, such as:

- Encouraging students to examine multiple perspectives
- Nurturing empathy
- Recognizing bias in media
- Analyzing media and its sources
- Engaging in "brave space" respectful discussions
- Regulating emotions
- Defining and recognizing discrimination

The faculty and administration will continue to collaborate in determining the most appropriate ways to include these discussions within the classrooms.

In conclusion, we recognize the challenges ahead as we navigate the complexities of our world. Despite these challenges, our commitment to cultivating critical thinking and fostering a community built on respect, understanding and empathy remains unwavering. We understand that there may be difficult conversations and disagreements along the way, but we are dedicated to addressing them with integrity and compassion.

Thank you for your continued trust and partnership as we work together to create a safe and inclusive learning environment for all.

Sincerely,

Michael O'Connor
Head of School

The Board of Directors
St. George's School of Montreal

Rachel Cobrin
Board Chairperson