

# 10 PRINCIPLES FOR EMPOWERING THE AMERICAN MIND



## PRINCIPLE 1: NO COMPELLED SPEECH, THOUGHT, OR BELIEF.

It is usually bad to tell someone what they cannot say. It is usually far worse to tell someone what they must say, and it is always wrong to tell people what they must think or believe.

If you believe that K-12 schools should inculcate specific political beliefs, you must consider how differently you would feel if those beliefs were, for example, the imposition of the belief that America is—and has always been—a utopia, that all must express unrelenting patriotism, and that to question American exceptionalism is a punishable offense. We oppose any of these attempts to enforce specific political beliefs, and we hope that parents and educators will agree.



## PRINCIPLE 2: RESPECT FOR INDIVIDUALITY, DISSENT, AND THE SANCTITY OF CONSCIENCE.

If K-12 education is to include moral education, it must allow students to question or dissent from the moral education it provides without fear of punishment. Otherwise, it is indoctrination and thought reform, not education. When students disagree with moral instruction, they should be graded on how well they argue their counterpoints; they should not be treated as if they had committed a sacrilege.

There is a realm of personal conscience that those in authority have no right to invade. If we are to have a truly free, diverse, pluralistic society, the most K-12 educators should do is to try to persuade; they should not force adherence to any ideology.

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## PRINCIPLE 3: DEMONSTRATE EPISTEMIC HUMILITY AT ALL LEVELS OF TEACHING AND POLICYMAKING.

Curiosity should not be merely taught: It is most effectively learned by example. Demonstrating epistemic humility is one of the best ways to do that. A teacher being willing to say truthfully, “I don’t know—let’s find out,” does not undermine that teacher’s authority in the classroom, and it can bring appreciation for how massive the world of knowledge is.

Heavy-handed ideological programs always show epistemic arrogance. To believe that students must be inculcated with specific political or ideological beliefs is to assume the infallibility of those beliefs and the omniscience of the instructors or of the curriculum designers.

This is not the way we educate people to become critical thinkers. Our collective knowledge is incomplete, no ideology has a monopoly on truth, and to tell young people otherwise leaves them ill-equipped to live in a society in which questions are always open, debates are always to be had, and new discoveries are always to be made.



## PRINCIPLE 4: FOSTER THE BROADEST POSSIBLE CURIOSITY, CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS, AND DISCOMFORT WITH CERTAINTY.

Our collective knowledge is nowhere near complete, yet it vastly surpasses the competence of any one individual, field, or even community to know. If we want to educate citizens to navigate this limitless ocean of information, we should cultivate a thirst for knowledge and the intellectual habits that transform information into knowledge.

As the great jurist Learned Hand said in 1944, “The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right.” And, of course, a dogmatic moral certainty among teenagers entering both college and full voting citizenship undermines free speech, freedom of inquiry, and democratic compromise. After all, if you’re already certain that you know the complex moral truths about the world, what use would you have for discussion, debate, or research?



## PRINCIPLE 5: FOSTER INDEPENDENCE, NOT MORAL DEPENDENCY.

Free societies must include some element of individual responsibility and encouragement to handle conflicts on one's own. It is hard to overstate the dangers of training a generation of people in a democratic society to always look to authority figures to resolve life's difficulties. This does not mean that K-12 faculty and administrators should never intervene, but it means they should not be too eager to intervene in interpersonal conflicts among students.

To cultivate independence, resilience, and initiative, educators need to take off students' metaphorical training wheels.



## PRINCIPLE 6: DO NOT TEACH CHILDREN TO THINK IN COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS.

We as a society seem to be teaching a generation of students the mental habits of anxious and depressed people. We mean this quite literally: Cognitive distortions are exaggerated patterns of thought that are out of line with reality. All people engage in cognitive distortions to some degree, but if you engage in too many, too often, you may become anxious, depressed, or both. Not coincidentally, learning to avoid cognitive distortions is also a good way to learn critical thinking. Indeed, some of the tools of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy can just as easily be applied to the rules of productive debate between two people as to the habits of healthy thinking within one's own mind.

The antidote to cognitive distortions is practiced disputation, which means examining and engaging with competing ideas in order to correct distortions and arrive at a nearer approximation to the truth. Shielding students from competing ideas, therefore, does them no favors. Schools are tasked with instructing developing minds on the importance of sound, logical reasoning. They should not allow—or worse, promote—what are, effectively, logical fallacies.



## PRINCIPLE 7: DO NOT TEACH THE “THREE GREAT UNTRUTHS.”

As a society, we are teaching a generation three manifestly bad overarching “untruths”—ideas that contradict both ancient wisdom and modern psychology:

The Untruth of Fragility: What doesn't kill you makes you weaker.

The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning: Always trust your feelings.

The Untruth of Us Versus Them: Life is a battle between good and evil people.

Each untruth is harmful by itself; together, they are a recipe for anxiety, helplessness, and victimization in response to every encounter in life that contains some level of adversity. They are also a formula for a dysfunctional society. Students who practice the opposite of these untruths—who develop resilience, learn to contextualize their emotional responses, and offer others the benefit of the doubt—will be prepared for life and citizenship in a pluralistic democracy.



## PRINCIPLE 8: TAKE STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH MORE SERIOUSLY.

If we sincerely care about students' mental health, we should not be teaching them to internalize guilt, shame, hopelessness, lack of individual identity, and the impossibility of love and friendship across lines of difference. We should be fostering their anti-fragility, their resilience, and their confidence so they can face higher education as empowered, hopeful, and creative thinkers.



## PRINCIPLE 9: DON'T REDUCE COMPLEX STUDENTS TO LIMITING LABELS.

Sorting students into politically useful categories that involve assigning them character attributes or destinies based on immutable traits circumscribes their potential and hampers their growth. Self-determination is foundational to the American promise and central to our unique national identity. Students must be permitted to decide for themselves how much, or how little, emphasis they wish to place on their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, social class, or economic background.



## PRINCIPLE 10: IF IT'S BROKE, FIX IT.

Be willing to form new institutions that empower students and educate them with the principles of a free, diverse, and pluralistic society. Is this a formula for peace and quiet? No. But free societies aren't supposed to be particularly quiet. As Justice Robert Jackson gravely warned in 1943, attempts to coerce unanimity of opinion have only resulted in “the unanimity of the graveyard.”

We must not become so wedded to an ideology, an institutional organizational structure, or a method of interacting that we become impervious to legitimate criticism or meaningful reform.