



## On the Path 2.3 Engaging in Civil Conversations

Welcome to On the Path. I'm Joyce Sherry, York School Dean of Students.

Many of you are familiar with our advisory program, PATH, and I wanted to provide an overview of this year's focus or theme. First, a quick introduction. What is PATH? Briefly stated, it's an advisory period of small (usually 10-12) mixed grade level, mostly co-ed groups with a campus adult acting as a facilitator, or Sherpa, for the meetings. In the Student/Family Handbook, we say:

"The purpose of these meetings is to find many ways to elicit ideas on the question "What kind of person do you want to be?" What aspects of your life give you the greatest meaning? How do we intentionally develop, at all stages of our lives, into our most authentic selves? How do we interact with the world in a meaningful, constructive way? Ideally, the meetings also promote a sense of interconnectedness among the classes. Ultimately, the purpose of PATH is to help prepare students for the hurdles life will inevitably erect in their...paths."

Thanks to brain research of the last few years, data-driven thinking about education, and a greater insight into the workings of the adolescent brain, we now have a much, much clearer understanding of the essential nature of the social-emotional experience for teenagers in high school. We've always known that York is a special place. Now we know that a couple of the things that have contributed to the success of our students for so long are the very social-emotional aspects highlighted in studies: interconnectedness of the community and the sense of safety (both physical and intellectual) that our students enjoy. A purpose of PATH is to promote social-emotional learning in our students, leading to their greater success academically and personally now, at college, and in their lives.

For the last few years, the topics of PATH have been based on a particular theme. For 2013-14, the theme was three of the habits of mind discussed in Paul Tough's book *How Children Succeed* (resilience, gratitude, and optimism). For 2014-15, the theme was based on my profound learning from the Berkeley/Greater Good Science Center course on the Science of Happiness. For 2015-16, the theme was The One and the Herd, how we balance a sense of autonomy with finding a meaningful place in society.

This school year, the focus of the meetings will be on civil (ie., respectful, courteous) disagreement in a vibrant community.

Over the years, and especially evident during these last 18 months of the presidential campaign, we have witnessed a decline in civil conversation and civil disagreement. Whether it's candidates' debates, reality TV, talk news shows, Facebook, whatever, what is modeled for our students is entrenchment in their own ideas and a shouting match to prove your opinion is mightier than your opponent's. Even that word, "opponent," suggests combativeness rather than conversation.

Confirmation bias causes us to see only those “facts” that support our previously held opinions. Our circles on social media and our news gathering tend to further reinforce our positions. When we have the opportunity to converse with someone who might disagree with us, we tend to close our mouths and avoid the discussion in order to keep the peace.

Last year, when we were surveying students and holding focus groups, it came up several times that students can be afraid to share their political and religious convictions for fear of the conversation devolving into a furious argument. Our students are wonderful about disagreeing with each other respectfully when it comes to classroom discussions that involve analysis of a topic. It would be great if we could help them to learn how to disagree respectfully about emotionally charged topics, whether on or off campus.

An interesting movement is rising that promotes purposely engaging in these deep conversations among people whose views and opinions are significantly different. One program for structuring this dialogue is called Living Room Conversations. We are working with the founders of this program to adapt it for high schools. The purpose and process of Living Room Conversations (or LRC) aligns beautifully with the mission and philosophy of York School.

Here are the ground rules promoted by LRC for every conversation:

#### Be Curious and Open to Learning

Listen to and be open to hearing all points of view. Maintain an attitude of exploration and learning. Conversation is as much about listening as it is about talking.

#### Show Respect and Suspend Judgment

Human beings tend to judge one another. Do your best not to. Setting judgment aside will better enable you to learn from others and help them feel respected and appreciated.

#### Look for Common Ground and Appreciate Differences

In this conversation, we look for what we agree on and simply appreciate that we will disagree on some beliefs and opinions.

#### Be Authentic and Welcome That from Others

Share what’s important to you. Speak authentically from your personal and heartfelt experience. Be considerate to others who are doing the same.

#### Be Purposeful and to the Point

Notice if what you are conveying is or is not “on purpose” to the question at hand. Notice if you are making the same point more than once.

#### Own and Guide the Conversation

Take responsibility for the quality of your participation and the quality of the conversation by noticing what’s happening and actively support getting yourself and others back “on purpose” when needed.

We began our PATH meetings with a Convocation, or coming together, of the whole campus community. There, we explained the theme for the year and went through four of the six

guidelines. The conversation became most meaningful when we asked students to consider the meanings to them of the phrases "Sense of purpose" and "Sense of duty." The consensus was that a sense of purpose calls us forward into action, while a sense of duty pushes us to action. Many students felt that it was possible for the two to coexist. To end the Convocation, we asked students to spend a moment explaining to a neighbor whether they, personally, felt guided more in life by purpose or duty.

In our first small group meetings, we began by reviewing the guidelines of discussion, then revisiting the question of duty or purpose. Many students felt they had not yet found their sense of purpose, but that it would come as they explored life and learning. To promote a more profound connection of relationship, an essential piece of respectful communication and of a life filled with well-being, we asked students to share their answer to the question for the day: What would your best friend say about who you are and what makes you "tick"? I suggest you take a moment to reflect on what your answer would be. For me, I found sharing the answer with my pathies to be a surprisingly difficult thing to do. After all, what our best friends would say about us would be loving and complimentary, and to speak that out loud felt horribly braggy and vulnerable making. As always, I was impressed by the level of thoughtfulness and self-awareness our students expressed, as well as their openness to and acceptance of each other.

At press time, we have not yet had our second small group meeting. The exercise and questions for this meeting are designed to give students time to reflect on the different perspectives that undoubtedly exist on campus and to take stock of how such variety might both challenge and enrich each of us.

As I've described the year's PATH theme at morning coffees and other meetings, parents have asked how they could help support our effort. I have two essential requests of you: First, please encourage your students to share their thoughts in a way others can hear them and to listen respectfully to the ideas and perspectives of others. Second, if you are aware of a topic you think would be challenging for our students, one that speaks to social, political, religious, campus culture, or life issues, please drop me a line to suggest that we include it in our PATH conversations for the year.

As always, if you have questions or comments, please email me at [jsherry@york.org](mailto:jsherry@york.org).

