

# NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

# YOUTH FREE EXPRESSION

## GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPING POLICIES ON THE DISPLAY OF STUDENT ART

### 1. Why have a policy?

Beyond offering aesthetic benefits, art fosters the free exchange of ideas, broadens K-12 students' intellectual curiosity and promotes tolerance to diverse perspectives. In support of its educational mission, schools should provide opportunities for students to engage with and exhibit artwork. Without established procedures governing the manner in which student art may be displayed, school officials risk imposing their own biases and violating students' right to freely express their views.

With a principled art display policy, schools can demonstrate their commitment to free expression and guard against censorship. Following these guidelines will protect artistic freedom and aid students' creative learning.

### 2. What should it include?

A strong artistic expression policy should start with a statement of the school's commitment to free expression and an acknowledgement of its obligation to maintain viewpoint neutrality. The policy should note that by exhibiting student works, the school does not necessarily endorse the viewpoints or ideas these works express.

The policy should be made freely available to students, teachers and the general public and should include:

- **Criteria** for the selection of artwork;
- **Procedures** for the selection and exhibition of artwork; and
- Procedures for handling complaints or requests for restrictions of access.

### 3. Criteria for Selection

The selection criteria for artwork to be shown in classrooms or on school grounds should be objective and viewpoint-neutral. Such criteria may include:

- relevance and satisfaction of curricular objectives;
- the artistic merit and technical proficiency of the work
- size, medium and duration.

To promote dialogue and inclusiveness, schools may prefer works with social or cultural significance that reflect diverse viewpoints.

The possibility that the subject matter of the work might be controversial, or potentially offensive to some groups or individuals, should not be a reason to exclude it from display. Nor should vague criteria, such as "inappropriate" be used as grounds for rejecting work.

#### 4. Procedures for selection and exhibition of student artistic works

A comprehensive school policy should also specify how staff, including teachers, will select student artworks for display or performance. Often, student art is created as part of a curricular project. Artwork may also be produced and/or displayed outside the classroom for an extracurricular purpose. Selection procedures should outline:

- A process for vetting and soliciting artwork [e.g. exemplary curricular works may be selected by teachers for in-class display while a neutral body of reviewers select works for general display. Some policies reiterate selection criteria in assignments or extracurricular calls for submission.]
- Restrictions on the time, place, and manner in which the exhibition spaces will be used. These restrictions must be content-neutral and universally applied. [e.g. a school may designate separate spaces for curricular and extracurricular art projects and may limit access to the artwork by grade level, provided that the same rules and regulations apply to everyone regardless of their ideology or personal beliefs.]
- Be sure your procedures allot sufficient time for staff to preview artworks in their proper context and before their intended exhibition. This will better prepare staff to respond to any complaints in an informed manner.

**Consider this:** Inform teachers and staff who may not otherwise be privy to the curatorial process about the rationale and artistic value of displayed artworks. This will enable them to provide inquiring community members with relevant contextual information.

#### 5. Complaints and Requests for Removal of Art

The policy should outline procedures for handling complaints and specify the cases in which the exhibition of approved artwork is to be reconsidered. They should include the following provisions:

- Complaints and requests for removal or restriction of access shall be directed in writing to the Principal.
- Upon receipt of a request, the Principal shall notify the teacher and student artist.
- Pending formal review, the art display or performance at issue shall be left in its original and unaltered state. Any unauthorized removal or vandalism of art displays will be subject to disciplinary sanction.
- Requests shall be reviewed by a district-appointed committee that includes the relevant teaching staff and other stakeholders such as parents and students,
- This committee should render a judgment on the basis of the selection criteria cited in the policy, as well as a statement by the student artist, where possible.
- Student artists shall be invited to submit a statement to the committee, notified of the decisions of the committee, and permitted a formal appeal. If the artwork is removed, students have the right to have their original art returned to them.