

VISTA CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

601 North Fairview Street
Santa Ana, CA 92703
T: (714) 881-7407 | F: (714) 988-2747
www.vistacharterpublicschools.org

Collin Felch, Ed.D., Superintendent
Karen Amaya, Assistant Superintendent



Student Freedom of Speech and Expression Policy

The Board of Directors of Vista Charter Public Schools ("VCPS" or the "Charter School") respects students' rights to express ideas and opinions, take stands, and support causes, whether controversial or not, through their speech, writing, printed materials, including the right of expression in official publications, and/or the wearing of buttons, badges and other insignia.

Definitions

1. **"Obscenity"**: when the (1) average person applying current community standards finds the work as a whole appeals to the prurient interest, (2) the work is patently offensive, and (3) the work lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value. Examples include pornography or sexually explicit material.
2. **"Defamation"**: Libel (written defamation) and slander (oral defamation), which includes but is not limited to inaccurately attributing a statement to another, either on purpose for public officials (which includes Charter School staff) or by mistake for private officials, that mischaracterizes the statement.
3. **"Discriminatory Material"**: material that demeans a person or group because of the person/group's mental or physical disability, sex (including pregnancy and related conditions and parental status), sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, gender expression, immigration status, nationality (including national origin, country of origin, and citizenship), race or ethnicity (including ancestry, color, ethnic group identification, ethnic background, and traits associated with race, including but not limited to, hair texture and protective hairstyles such as braids, locs, and twists), religion (including agnosticism and atheism), religious affiliation, medical condition, genetic information, marital status, age, or association with a person or group with one or more of these actual or perceived characteristics or any other basis protected by federal, state, local law, ordinance or regulation that has the purpose of humiliating, offending, or provoking a person/group.
4. **"Harassment (including sexual harassment), Intimidation and/or Bullying"**: severe or pervasive physical or verbal act or conduct, including communications made in writing or by means of an electronic act. Bullying includes one or more acts committed by a student or group of students that may constitute sexual harassment, hate violence, or creates an intimidating and/or hostile educational environment, directed toward one or more students that has or can be reasonably predicted to have the effect of one or more of the following: (1) placing a reasonable student or students in fear of harm to that student's or those students' person or property, (2) causing a reasonable student to experience a substantially detrimental effect on his or her physical or mental health, (3) causing a reasonable student to experience a substantial interference with his or her academic performance, (4) causing a reasonable student to experience a substantial interference with his or her ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or privileges provided by the Charter School.
5. **"Fighting Words"**: words likely to cause (1) the average person to fight or (2) the creation of a clear and present danger of violence, unlawful acts in violation of lawful school regulations, or the substantial disruption of school.
6. **"Vulgarity and/or Profanity"**: the continual use of curse words by a student, even after warning.

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7. “Violating Privacy”: publicizing or distributing confidential or private material without permission.

On-Campus Expression

Student free speech rights include, but are not limited to, the use of bulletin boards, the distribution of printed materials or petitions, the wearing of buttons, badges, and other insignia, and the right of expression in official publications, whether or not the publications or other means of expression are supported financially by the school or by use of school facilities. Student expression on or through the Charter School’s website, social media, or other school-sponsored platforms or devices shall generally be afforded the same protections and subject to the same limitations as printed material within the Policy. Students’ use of Charter School technology, devices, platforms and accounts remain subject to Charter School’s Student Technology Policy and Acceptable Use Agreement.

Student freedom of expression shall be limited only as allowed by state and federal law in order to maintain an orderly school environment and to protect the rights, health, and safety of all members of the school community. Unprotected expression includes the following: obscenity; defamation; discriminatory material; harassment (including sexual harassment), intimidation and/or bullying; fighting words; vulgarity and/or profanity; or violating privacy as defined above. Also prohibited shall be material that incites a clear and present danger of the commission of unlawful acts on school premises or the violation of lawful school regulations or the substantial disruption of the orderly operation of the Charter School.

A. Distribution of Circulars, Un-Official Newspapers, and Other Printed Material

Free inquiry and exchange of ideas are essential parts of a democratic education. Students shall be allowed to distribute circulars, leaflets, newspapers, and pictorial or other printed material, and to circulate petitions, subject to the following specific limitations:

1. The material to be distributed shall be submitted to the Charter School Superintendent or designee at least one (1) school day prior to distribution. The Charter School Superintendent or designee shall review material submitted in a reasonable amount of time and shall allow the approved material to be distributed according to the time and manner established by this Policy. The Charter School Superintendent or designee shall notify student(s) if distribution will be granted or denied (and if denied, why distribution is not in compliance with this Policy).
2. Distribution, free or for a fee, may take place before school, after school, and/or during lunch provided there is no substantial disruption in the school programs (as determined by the Charter School Superintendent). Distribution may not occur during instructional time and should not occur in locations that disrupt the normal flow of traffic within the school or at school entrances.
3. The manner of distribution shall be such that coercion is not used to induce students to accept the printed material or to sign petitions.
4. The solicitation of signatures must not take place in instructional classes or school offices, nor be substantially disruptive to the school program (as determined by the Charter School Superintendent or designee).

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The Charter School Superintendent or designee shall work with student government representatives in the development of these procedures. Student responsibilities shall be emphasized.

B. Official School Publications

Student editors of official school publications shall be responsible for assigning and editing the news, editorial, and feature content of their publications subject to the limitations of this Policy. However, it shall be the responsibility of the journalism staff adviser(s) of student publications to supervise the production of the student staff, to maintain professional standards of English and journalism, and to maintain the provisions of this Policy.¹ The journalism staff adviser(s) shall help the student editors judge the literary value, newsworthiness and propriety of materials submitted for publication.

There shall be no prior restraint of material prepared for official school publications except insofar as it violates this Policy. VCPS officials shall have the burden of showing justification without undue delay prior to a limitation of student expression under this Policy. If the journalism staff adviser(s) consider material submitted for publication to violate this Policy, he or she will notify the student without undue delay and give specific reasons why the submitted material may not be published. The student should be given the opportunity to modify the material or appeal the decision of the journalism staff adviser to the Charter School Superintendent.

C. Buttons, Badges, and Other Insignia of Symbolic Expression

Students shall be permitted to wear buttons, badges, armbands, and other insignia as a form of expression, subject to the prohibitions enumerated in this Policy.

D. Use of Bulletin Boards

Students will be provided with bulletin boards, upon request and subject to availability, for use in posting student materials on campus locations convenient to student use. Where feasible, the location and quantity of such bulletin boards shall be by mutual agreement of student government representatives and VCPS administration. Posted material must be in compliance with other sections of this Policy, particularly regarding the distribution of materials and prohibited speech. Students may not post or distribute materials regarding the meetings of non-curricular student-initiated groups.

E. Organized Demonstrations

Students have the right to lawful organized on-campus demonstrations, subject to the provisions of this Policy and applicable law. Demonstrations that incite students to create a clear and present danger of the commission of unlawful acts on school premises or the violation of lawful school regulations, or demonstrations that substantially disrupt the orderly operation of the school are prohibited.

No individual student may demonstrate in the name of the Charter School or as an official school group at any time unless authorized by the Charter School to participate in the activity.

F. Student Speeches

¹ "Official school publications" refers to material produced by students in the journalism, newspaper, yearbook, or writing classes and distributed to the student body either free or for a fee.

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If a student is selected to speak at a Charter School sponsored event, including but not limited to graduation or school assemblies, Charter School has the right to review the pre-prepared speech to ensure that unprotected speech is not included. If unprotected speech is included, the student will be given the opportunity to revise the speech or deliver a modified speech. If not revised or removed, the student will not be permitted to speak at the Charter School sponsored event.

Off-Campus Expression

Off-campus student expression, including but not limited to student expression on non-school sponsored internet web sites, personal social media or email accounts, or via text messages sent on a personal device outside of school hours, is generally constitutionally protected but shall be subject to discipline when there is a sufficient nexus between the speech and the school.

Relevant considerations include:

1. The degree and likelihood of harm to the Charter School (staff, students, volunteers, and/or property) caused or augured by the expression,
2. Whether it is reasonably foreseeable that the expression would reach and impact the Charter School, and
3. The relation between the content and/or context of the expression and the Charter School. There is always a sufficient nexus between the expression and the Charter School when the Charter School reasonably concludes that it faces a credible, identifiable threat of school violence.

The Charter School Superintendent or designee shall document the impact the expression had or could be expected to have on the educational program. Off-campus expression that results in the material disruption of classwork or involves substantial disorder or invasion of the rights of others may be subject to discipline.

Off-campus expression may result in discipline if the expression involves but is not limited to:

- a. Serious or severe bullying or harassment targeting particular individuals;
- b. Threats aimed at teachers or other students;
- c. The failure to follow rules concerning lessons, the writing of papers, the use of computers, or participation in other online school activities; or
- d. Breaches of school security devices.

Enforcement

1. Upon learning that students are considering actions in the areas covered by this Policy they will be informed of the possible consequences of their action under each specific circumstance. The Charter School Superintendent shall ensure that due process is followed when resolving disputes regarding student freedom of expression.
2. This Policy does not prohibit or prevent the VCPS Governing Board from adopting otherwise valid rules and regulations relating to oral communications by students upon the VCPS campus.

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3. No VCPS employee shall be dismissed, suspended, disciplined, reassigned, transferred, or otherwise retaliated against solely for acting to protect a student engaged in the conduct authorized under this Policy, or refusing to infringe upon conduct that is authorized under this Policy, the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, or Section 2 of Article I of the California Constitution.
4. VCPS shall not make or enforce a rule subjecting a student to disciplinary sanctions solely on the basis of conduct that is speech or other communication that, when engaged in outside of the campus, is protected from governmental restriction by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution or Section 2 of Article I of the California Constitution.

Complaints and Appeals

The following procedures shall be used to address general disputes regarding student freedom of speech and expression:

1. The student and faculty member shall first attempt to resolve the problem internally.
2. If the student and faculty member are unable to resolve the dispute, the student and/or faculty member may bring the matter to the Charter School Superintendent or designee, who shall hear both sides and strive to resolve the dispute as quickly as possible.
3. Any student or faculty member may appeal the decision of the Charter School Superintendent or designee to the Board who shall render a decision within a reasonable period of time after receipt of the appeal. The appeal by the student must be made within five (5) school days from the time the unsatisfactory decision was rendered.

A student who feels their freedom of expression was unconstitutionally limited may file a complaint with VCPS in accordance with the Charter School's General Complaint Policies and Procedures.