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## Boston Public Schools Office of Equity/Office of Opportunity Gaps Guidelines for the Use of Offensive Terms in the Classroom

Outside of the context of carefully planned and structured classroom discussions rooted in thoughtful educational objectives, the Boston Public Schools does not tolerate the use of slurs or other offensive terms. Offensive terms should never be used unless there is a compelling instructional purpose.

While studying the breadth of history and literature sometimes requires exposure to the worst of human behavior and language, educating students regarding that behavior and language requires deliberate planning and execution. These guidelines aim to provide teachers, department heads, and other educators and school leaders with assistance in ensuring that classroom discussions that include references to offensive terms are constructive, respectful, and do not result in actual or perceived acts of bias. This document does not aim to provide a comprehensive framework for culturally and linguistically sustaining practices in the classroom.

These guidelines are not intended to censor or discourage the vital and sometimes uncomfortable conversations that lead to our deepest learnings as young people and adults.

When a classroom discussion is planned that includes or spontaneously involves the use of or reference to offensive terms, application of the following guidelines is strongly encouraged. Each classroom situation has unique dynamics and considerations, and teachers and students have the opportunity to flexibly apply these guidelines.

Offensive terms may include derogatory terms or slurs that refer to:

- Race or ethnicity
- Religion
- Gender (female, male, non-binary, or transgender)
- Disability
- Sexual identity

The use of profanity may also be offensive, including to those with religious practices that prohibit such terms.

## 1. Set ground rules.

Creating ground rules in advance of the use of any offensive terms is the single most important step that an educator should take to ensure the effectiveness of the instruction. Ideally, ground rules should be set in partnership with the students themselves rather than simply announcing them to the class. Once ground rules are set, it is generally best to apply the same ground rules to any and all offensive terms used in that particular class going forward.

The following is a list of examples of possible ground rules that may be considered and/or tailored for use during a particular lesson or series of lessons:

- Offensive terms will never be used in the classroom under any circumstances.
- While the word [slur for African-Americans] appears in the text we are reading, we will not say the full word in class, and instead, will use the term, “the n-word.”
- While reading the text out loud today, we will pause for a “beat” of silence whenever we come to the word [slur for gay men] in the text.
- Offensive terms will never be used in reference to individuals or groups who are not the immediate subject of the lesson.
- Offensive terms will never be used in association with any student or educator in the classroom.
- If the teacher or a student is not a member of the group targeted by a particular term, they may not use that term under any circumstances. For example, an individual who identifies as heterosexual will not use the word [slur for gay man]. This approach would generally not be appropriate to be applied regarding identities that staff and/or students may prefer to keep confidential, such as sexual identity.
- While we have agreed to use the word [slur for Latinos] in today’s class only, if at any time anyone in the class feels offended by how it is used or changes their mind about being open to its use, we will welcome that input and reconsider our ground rules at that time. If such an incident occurs, one effective approach is to ask the students to share in pairs how they are feeling, and then invite them to share with the full class.
- While generally we would not allow the word [slur for females] to be used in class or during any school activity, we are currently discussing the word for educational purposes, and agree to allow the word to be used for today’s class only.

An effective discussion of ground rules gives students the opportunity to reach consensus (every student in the class coming to agreement). For example, if just one student says he prefers that we not use the word [slur for people with disabilities beginning with the letter g] -- even if the rest of the class is willing to use the full word -- then the entire class should be

expected to set and adhere to the guideline that the term, “the g word” be used instead. Teachers should consider offering a variety of ways for students to provide feedback on the guidelines, including via email, in private, or through other means outside of the class meeting time.

Generally, teachers are encouraged to select ground rules that avoid the use of offensive language in the classroom, especially because students may not always feel comfortable speaking up when they feel disrespected or excluded.

## 2. Ensure cultural awareness.

Prior to the discussion that involves an offensive term, ensure that the teacher and the students have a high degree of awareness of students’ wide range of backgrounds, identities, and experiences.

Our effectiveness as educators depends on our personal connections with our students, including our knowledge of their cultural backgrounds and how their backgrounds have impacted their life experiences. The more that we, as instructors, and our students, as classmates, are aware of each other’s identities and life stories, the more effective our conversations on highly charged topics will be.

## 3. Ensure there is at least one highly skilled facilitator leading the discussion.

As teachers, we are generally well-prepared to lead classroom discussions. However, when those discussions involve highly-charged topics with or without the use of offensive terms, topics that we may not have been given the opportunity to study during our own years as students, we may not have the knowledge or skills to facilitate effectively. For example, if a teacher was raised in a part of the country with very few Jews, and has not had the opportunity to study the history or current realities of anti-Semitism, he or she may not have the skills or knowledge to lead an effective classroom discussion about a text about the Holocaust. Teachers are strongly encouraged to make accurate self-assessments and seek assistance from their department head, principal/headmaster, colleagues, the Office of Equity, or the Office of the Opportunity and Achievement Gap when facilitation assistance would be helpful.

## 4. Seek assistance when challenges arise.

If any situation arises where bias-based conduct is alleged or a classroom discussion results in unresolved discomfort for one or more students, contact the Office of Equity for assistance.