



# Columbus Academy

## **CURRICULUM AND CULTURAL COMPETENCY: HOW OUR SHARED VALUES FOSTER ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE AND PERSONAL GROWTH**

We thought this would be a good time to provide an overview of our curriculum development process; how cultural competency is incorporated into the curriculum; why we continue to update and add to our curriculum on an ongoing basis; and how cultural competency enhances our students' academic performance.

### **Overview Of The Curriculum – What's In It?**

- Course description guides provide an overview of each element of our curriculum. As has been the case for over 10 years, they are available on our website, and are updated annually. They are available here: [Lower School](#), [Middle School](#), [Upper School](#).
- As you and your children are no doubt aware, we continue to have rigorous academic standards. Graduation requirements include four years of English and math, three years of history and science, either three years of a single foreign language or two years of two languages, and a year of fine or performing arts. Other requirements include the Junior Speech and the Senior Project, as well as multiple other courses.
- Our curriculum incorporates our school's mission and values and its Strategic Vision. Our Strategic Vision was adopted five years ago and is available here: <https://www.columbusacademy.org/strategicvision>.
- By its nature, our curriculum is not static. Individual lesson plans, for example, adjust and change throughout the school year to adapt to factors too numerous to list – everything from varying rates of student progress and performance, to emerging areas of interest or research, to input from students themselves.
- No one person or department creates “the curriculum.” For example, the Director of Diversity and Community Life has not made (and does not have the authority to make) unilateral changes to the curriculum. Teachers, division heads, and departmental leaders create and implement the curriculum, with oversight from the leadership team.
- Given its breadth, depth, and fluidity, “the curriculum” is not easily summarized or reduced to talking points.

### **How Has The Curriculum Been Changing In Recent Years?**

- The curriculum is in a near-constant process of continuous improvement, refinement, and adaptation. These changes are evolutionary, not radical or revolutionary. The process is exciting, refreshing, and, at times, challenging for faculty and students alike.
- Changes in recent years have come in many forms. Here are a few examples:
  - We have moved away from lecture-based, teacher-at-the-center models of instruction to a more student-centered pedagogy. This was made possible by changes in the



schedules in all three divisions – most notably the block schedule adopted in both the Middle and Upper Schools.

- We've also added more variety in the English Department for 11/12 grade electives that provide far more choice and differentiation along student interests and combine classical texts with more contemporary ones.
- We now have more electives in the Math Department, giving students more choices beyond AP Calculus as well as more non-calculus options for students who are interested in non-calculus based mathematics such as statistics and quantitative reasoning.
- We are also offering more electives in the Science Department in the areas of Environmental Sciences, Anatomy, and Robotics.
- The World Language Department has continued to align with the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)'s recommendations and standards, including the use of language to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the practices and perspectives of other cultures.
- For years, Health has been taught from grade 5 (4th quarter) through grade 9 at developmentally appropriate stages based on the concept of providing the knowledge and skills necessary to promote a healthy lifestyle. Parents are notified of topics covered and students are asked to critically analyze messages from society/media/peers and act according to their own internalized value system.
- These examples are not an exhaustive list. Parents are encouraged to talk with their child's classroom teacher about any questions regarding the curriculum for their child's particular grade.

### **What Role Does Cultural Competency Play In The Curriculum?**

- Cultural competency is part of Goal 2 of the school's Strategic Vision, adopted over four years ago. As noted in our Strategic Vision, cultural competence elevates students' "insight into difference, ethics and character formation through reflective discovery about self and others and active implementation of cultural competencies." It also helps our students develop the skills necessary to fully engage with a pluralistic society and ever-changing world.
- The effort to align the curriculum with our Strategic Vision, including cultural competency, has been and continues to be an ongoing and evolving process since 2016. Here are just a few of many examples of this work.
- Formal character-building programs are woven into courses in each Division, teaching our students to listen for understanding, value others' ideas and lived experiences, and stand up for principles of fairness and justice. For example, the Upper School English



Department revised its curriculum to integrate diverse authors and stories, particularly related to people of color and women.

- Before reading *The Outsiders*, Middle School students complete exercises on identity and character, discussing what matters most about their identities, how identity differs from character and how stereotypes affect people. This is critical context and understanding not only for the book and society, but also for students' sense of self.
- In math and science, our teachers have highlighted the work of leaders of color and women.
- The History Department offers electives such as Advanced Moral Philosophy and Advanced Moral Psychology.

### **In The Lower School, Why Have There Been Changes To Columbus Day Observances, Native American History, And The Family Tree Project?**

- A move away from observing fall break on Columbus Day began several years ago and was largely about creating greater flexibility in the calendar for when fall break could be scheduled. We are now able to adjust the timing of fall break to better align with the needs of academic pacing, religious holidays, and athletics.
- The second grade teaching team initiated and developed changes to the curriculum regarding Native American history and the family tree project. The Director of Diversity and Community Life conferred with the teaching team regarding those elements. As has been our practice, the teaching team made the final decisions regarding the content.
- The family tree project can be difficult for many students, including those from non-traditional family structures or who are unable to trace their family histories beyond their immediate family. The teaching team recognized those issues and adjusted the project to make it more inclusive.
- Columbus Academy is not systematically removing historical events or figures from its teaching or otherwise “sanitizing” its curriculum. As discussed below in regard to the school’s book collection, adding some additional perspectives (such as the adjustments made to the Native American history content) does not imply or require the cancelling of others. While some concepts may become outdated, others can thrive alongside new and varied ways of approaching a subject. Ideas and perspectives are not a fixed pie; new ones can be added without existing ones being eliminated. Our curriculum is not subject to an artificial “size limit,” so new ideas and perspectives can be added without necessarily eliminating everything previously taught.

### **What Are The Specific Components Of The School’s Curriculum That “Address Racism?”**

- The school does not have a “racism curriculum.” Racism is not a separate, free-standing subject matter. We could not list the books, resources, etc. that “address racism,” any more than we could list all the materials that support our values of respect, responsibility, fairness, compassion, and honesty.



- Some classes (particularly in the Upper School) may discuss articles, books, current events, or issues that include references to racism, racial conflict, or efforts to combat racism, or that otherwise discuss issues of race. There has not been any top-down mandate to include specific readings or materials in those discussions. However, we view these discussions as not only appropriate but critical to preparing our students for life in the complex world that awaits them.

### **Does The School’s Curriculum Endorse “The 1619 Project?”**

- The school has not adopted a curriculum based on or endorsing all the elements of the 1619 Project. However, information from the 1619 Project (*A New York Times Magazine* long-form opinion piece and photographic essay, a portion of which was awarded a Pulitzer Prize) is included among a wide array of resources available to Middle and Upper School students through the History Department, and some of its photographic elements have been discussed in art classes as well. Additionally, Board members reviewed and discussed part of the 1619 Project in preparation for a Board cultural awareness event, and elements of the 1619 Project have been included in some of our professional development programs for faculty.

### **Is The School “Teaching Critical Race Theory?”**

- “Critical race theory” is a term used to describe various historical and theoretical approaches to understanding the role of race in America. It is also used to refer to the writings of specific scholars.
- “Critical race theory” per se is not part of the Columbus Academy curriculum. However, some students, particularly in the Upper School, may be exposed to some of the underlying concepts embedded in “critical race theory,” including concepts of systemic racism, as part of learning about different perspectives on various issues. While students may learn about concepts related to critical race theory as one among many topics in current political and social discourse, they are not being “taught” critical race theory any more than they are “taught” fascism or socialism when studying European history, or “taught” progressivism when studying Teddy Roosevelt.
- Similarly, faculty and staff have been provided with information and readings regarding varying perspectives on historical and contemporary events related to the role of race in America. Some of those readings and resources align with ideas within the broader perspective known as “critical race theory;” others do not. Neither faculty nor children are being indoctrinated in or required to follow or concur with the tenets or analysis of “critical race theory,” and student grades are not dependent on adherence to this or any other political or sociological perspective.
- We are proud to provide students with a range of information as they study both historical and contemporary issues. We expose our students to a variety of theoretical and political perspectives to help them become thoughtful, confident, responsible citizens ready to engage and thrive in a pluralistic world.



### **Are “To Kill A Mockingbird” And “Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn” Being Removed From The School? Are Other Books Being Removed From The School Library Or Classrooms?**

- Harper Lee’s classic novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* was assigned reading for 8th grade students this year, just as it has been for decades. There are no plans to remove it from the curriculum. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has not been taught at Columbus Academy for over 10 years.
- Our library provides extensive and varied resources to inspire lifelong reading, learning, and creativity. As has always been the case, books are sometimes removed from the library for a wide range of reasons, whether because they have not been checked out for a long time, have become outdated, are no longer relevant, or for other reasons. However, there is no broad, heavy-handed purge going on in our library, and no gutting of the resources available in individual classrooms.
- We are also always excited to be expanding our book collection. Recently we’ve been identifying opportunities to add additional books depicting a broad diversity of characters and stories. Our goal is to ensure that all children have access to books and stories they can relate to as reflecting parts of their own culture and family. Adding books depicting a wider range of family structures, religious beliefs, heritage, etc. helps support this goal. This review-and-add process will be conducted on an ongoing basis.

### **Are Works By Beethoven And Other Classical Composers Still Part Of The Music Curriculum?**

- Classical works, including Beethoven, continue to be an important part of the school’s musical curriculum.
- In addition to these classical works, our students have been, and will continue to be, exposed to a variety of music from an immense collection of cultures. For example, 2nd Graders this year have learned songs from Lebanon, Cuba, and Mexico, along with various folk songs from the American archives. In the Band Program, students’ grades 6-12 learn and perform music from a variety of composers and styles. The Pep Band performs music by current pop musicians as well as music from past decades’ musicians (notably the 60’s, 70’s and 80’s) while the Concert Band performs a wide range of music from composers both living and deceased, classical and contemporary. Music performed by the Jazz Band is composed predominantly by African American composers. In Upper School, Music Theory students learn the fundamental building blocks of music, primarily by studying the music of JS Bach. Throughout this rich and varied curriculum, students learn the music of composers and artists across races, genders, sexual orientations, geography, and time.



## **Has Our Approach To The Curriculum And Cultural Competency Hindered Our Commitment to Academic Excellence?**

- No, to the contrary! Our rich curriculum, including its cultural competency components, continues to produce outstanding results throughout our student body.
- Here are a few of the many examples of our students' recent successes:
  - Over the past 15 years, Columbus Academy has produced 184 National Merit Semifinalists and 156 Commended Students. This year, 22.5% of our Seniors have been recognized by the National Merit Scholarship Corporation.
  - We celebrated 99 AP Scholars in 2020, with 21 earning National AP Scholar recognition. Among our top 20 peer schools, Columbus Academy is 2<sup>nd</sup> in the number of Upper Schoolers taking more than one AP and 2<sup>nd</sup> in the highest percentage of 4's or 5's received on AP exams.
  - This year, our Upper School students will take a total of 568 AP exams this month – the largest number in school history.
  - Our average ACT and SAT scores have remained consistently impressive at approximately 31 and 1350, respectively. Both of these scores place our students above the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile for all those taking the exam.
  - Our students continue to be accepted to some of the country's most competitive colleges, and to successfully matriculate at a wide variety of schools. Over the last five years (2015-2020), Columbus Academy students have been admitted to the following highly selective colleges: Amherst (2), Boston College (8), Brown (5), Carnegie Mellon (3), Colby (1), Claremont-McKenna College (2), Colgate University (1), Colorado College (2), Columbia University (6), Cooper Union (1), Cal Tech (1), Cornell (2), Dartmouth (2), Duke (4), Emory (3), Georgetown (9), Hamilton (1), Harvard (10), Harvey Mudd (1), Haverford (1), Northwestern (7), Princeton (3), Rice (5), Swarthmore (2), Tufts (5), MIT (2), University of Michigan (12), Notre Dame (2), University of Southern California (11), Stanford (5), Tulane University (4), UC - Berkeley (2), UCLA (2), University of Pennsylvania (7), University of Virginia (3), Vanderbilt (1), Washington and Lee University (1), Washington University in St. Louis (9), Williams (2), and Yale (3).
- Our students' outstanding college admission results continued this year as well. A summary of Columbus Academy's Class of 2021 college acceptance list is available here: <https://www.columbusacademy.org/acceptancelist2021>.



- The Columbus community as a whole appears to recognize the strength of our programs; applications for admission are up 10% this year.

### **OUR STAND AGAINST RACISM**

The Columbus Academy Board of Trustees unanimously voted to admit members of the “non-white” races on May 7, 1963 – just days after the televising of fire hoses and police dogs being unleashed on segregation protesters in Birmingham, Alabama, and more than a year before Congress passed the Civil Rights Act. We believe today, just as we did over 50 years ago, that our community must be a leader in discussions about inclusion and equality. As our Head of School has previously observed, this can be “messy, hard work” – but we are committed to doing it. These are not partisan issues. They are fundamental values.

Last summer’s protests concerning discrimination against Black Americans inevitably became a topic of discussion at our school – what would it have said about us if it had not? We responded in several different ways. We published “United Against Racism” to articulate the school’s resolve against racism and to amplify the voices of Black students, alumni, parents and staff. Many of our faculty, staff, and board members also undertook to learn more about these issues in order to better understand the varying perspectives, and to view issues of race through the prism of our values - empathy, understanding, and cultural competency. But because there is sometimes an overlap between these values and politics, it is perhaps not surprising that some of our efforts were interpreted as “political” or “partisan” by some in our community.

The following addresses some questions about the school’s approach to these issues.

### **Was The School’s 2020 “United Against Racism” Publication “Pushing A Non-Inclusive Agenda” By Focusing On Discrimination Against African Americans Without Also Discussing Discrimination Faced By Hispanic And Latino Individuals And Other Minority Groups?**

- During the summer of 2020, the school addressed our community regarding the subject matter of the protests concerning racial injustice. We sought to learn about the underlying issues, send a message of support to African American members of our community, and to reiterate our commitment to cultural competency. “United Against Racism” (available here: <https://www.columbusacademy.org/unitedagainstracism>) was one part of this effort.
- Because the lived experiences of African Americans were a specific and heightened focus of national dialogue at that time, the school similarly focused its “United Against Racism” publication and related activities on the challenges faced by African Americans in particular. Focusing on African American experiences was not intended to be a denial or diminution of racism experienced by other minority groups; it was simply a focus on African Americans in particular at a point in time when the country as a whole was engaged in a similar examination.



## **Has The School Advocated For Or Endorsed “Defunding The Police” Or Other Political Campaigns?**

- The school does not endorse “defunding the police.”
- As part of an effort to raise awareness of various issues and perspectives circulating in the aftermath of George Floyd’s death, faculty and staff were invited last summer to participate in a learning and discussion group called “Justice in June,” using publicly available compiled resources. Those who chose to participate discussed issues concerning racial injustice and worked together to increase their understanding of these very sensitive and important issues.
- Participation in this discussion group was purely voluntary. In addition to some members of our faculty and staff, some of our Board members also used the “Justice in June” resources to inform themselves about these issues. Participants could join up to four facilitated discussions focused on different materials they had watched, listened to, or read.
- One of the many resources within the third party “Justice in June” materials was a link to an email campaign supporting reallocating police funding toward education, social services, and addressing racism. There were also links to the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project, several TED Talks, podcasts, books, articles, and many other materials in a variety of media from a variety of sources. The availability of the email campaign link within the lengthy set of materials was not an endorsement by the school of that email campaign, or of any political party, candidate, or position.
- Along the same lines, as part of a professional development initiative later in the summer our faculty members were encouraged to learn more about racism-related issues. Over a dozen options were presented in a related list of resources. The school’s leadership team compiled the resource list in an effort to help faculty learn about some of the issues then occupying the country, consider ways to integrate sensitivity to such issues into their own teaching, and be prepared for related questions that returning students might ask. The two assigned introductory readings were James Baldwin’s “A Talk to Teachers” and the Introduction to “Daring Greatly” by Brené Brown. Additional content was presented during the related professional development meeting itself, including a video of some of our faculty sharing their personal experiences and perspectives, and their appreciation for their Justice in June experiences.
- As with the voluntary programming in June, the professional development content was provided as a service and support to teachers as they prepared for the new school year. It was not a “political indoctrination.”



### **Does The School Or Its Leadership Team Endorse The Writings Of Dr. Ibram Kendi?**

- Dr. Kendi is a best-selling author, winner of the National Book Award, and Founding Director of the Boston University Center for Antiracist Research. He was named by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 most influential people of 2020.
- Following the publication of his best-selling book “How To Be an Antiracist,” Dr. Kendi was a popular speaker in 2020. Among other things, he was a featured speaker for the New Albany Series. Materials by Dr. Kendi were included in an optional reading list for faculty last summer.
- Neither the school nor its leadership team has any singular viewpoint on the teachings of Dr. Kendi or other scholars working to understand the role of race in American history and society. It is up to each individual to decide whether they might agree or disagree with the analysis provided by any particular author. As with numerous other writers, we have challenged faculty and students to learn about, analyze, and critique Dr. Kendi’s thinking, and that of other scholars as well. Exposure to differing viewpoints is a key component of an Academy education, and helps students develop the kind of critical thinking skills that will be vital for their future intellectual growth.

### **On Election Day 2020, Were First Graders Required To Stand In A Circle To Declare Who They “Were Voting For” In The Presidential Election? Were Lower School Students Required To Say Who They Supported In The Presidential Election?**

- The morning message on Election Day in some parts of the Lower School was, “Dear Future Voters. Today is Election Day Tuesday. It’s L day so we have Spanish this afternoon. We will get to vote for fun today.”
- In First Grade, our Responsive Classroom Practices encourage students to generate a topic each day for sharing time. The children sit in a circle and choose a topic to share about. The process allows children to take some ownership of a part of their learning process, practice speaking skills, and build vocabulary. It also fosters community respect and caring for each other. At one point sometime during election season some first graders decided to share about who they would “vote for” in the Presidential election. As with every other topic during sharing time on every day of the school year, students who did not wish to participate in the conversation could “pass.”
- In the Lower School, “voting” on Election Day was a Grade 5 project in which Lower School students had the opportunity to vote for one of three animals as their choice for a Lower School mascot. The winning animal was a wolf.



### **Are Teachers Required To Adhere To Any Particular Partisan Or Political Positions?**

- Teachers are free to form and follow the political beliefs of their choosing.
- We do ask that teachers endeavor to keep their personal political views from being a focus in the classroom. At times, this can be a challenging and nuanced process. Having said that, we have also provided faculty with resources to help navigate age-appropriate and content-relevant conversations in class that are an important part of our educational process. If concerns about the ways such issues are being discussed in the classroom are brought to the school's attention, we work to address them, with the goal of increasing sensitivity and awareness.
- As also noted above, we do not consider our cultural competency expectations to be "political" in nature. Empathy, awareness, and sensitivity are not partisan in nature.

### **Are Members Of The Faculty Or School Leadership Permitted To Express Their Political Viewpoints?**

- While there are many circumstances in which keeping one's political opinions to oneself helps avoid conflict with co-workers, parents, and others, adults in our school are nevertheless not prohibited from talking with each other about their personal opinions or political beliefs. As in all conversations, however, we do expect that all involved in any "political" discussions will do so with professionalism and courtesy. Similarly, adults in our school are not prohibited from expressing to each other their views on election outcomes or other matters of public policy.
- As noted above, we do not view statements opposing racism as "partisan." They are simply expressions of core values of the school. Similarly, educating ourselves about differing views on racism and its sources, or about current scholarship in these areas, is not "political."
- We encourage faculty to foster respectful and productive dialogue among students with divergent viewpoints. As noted in the Trustees' March 4, 2021 letter to the community, our faculty and administration – including, in particular, our Head of School – are committed to ensuring that classrooms are places in which diverse opinions are welcomed and students can express themselves respectfully. We hope and expect that the adults in our students' lives model similar behavior.

**We encourage families who would like to discuss their child's experience in school for any reason to do so individually.** Please know that teachers and administrators are open to candid, respectful dialogue and that it is best to start with your child's first point of contact – in most instances a teacher or advisor. If a family ultimately feels that further discussion is warranted, please contact a counselor, dean or division head and then, if necessary, the Head of School.