

Philosophical Chairs

Active listening, critical thinking, and respectful dialogue (even when we disagree about something) are learned skills. Everyone can learn them, and no one can perfect them without practice. Philosophical Chairs is designed to help us develop these skills while also learning about the opera.

You might find these statements challenging—and you might find it challenging to talk with someone who has a different answer from your own. That’s okay! Take your time with each statement, embrace uncertainty, and know that changing your mind when you learn new information is a sign of strength, not weakness. Before you begin your discussion, take some time to review the rules of engagement:

Be sure you understand the statement. If something is unclear, ask!

Face each other. Body language helps show that you’re listening carefully and respectfully.

Only one speaker at a time. Everyone will get their turn to speak.

Think before you speak. Be sure that what you’re going to say is what you really mean.

Summarize the previous person’s comments before adding your own.

Address ideas, not the person. Challenging ideas or statements is good only if we respect the individuality and inherent value of the person who expressed them.

Three before me. To make sure everyone’s voice is heard, you may not make another comment until three others have shared their thoughts.

The Statements

- All forms of racism stem from hatred. (FOLLOW UP—consider fear, anxiety, envy, resentment, ignorance, and arrogance; DISCUSS—what are the root causes of racism?)
- Racism is learned (or taught).
- I can recognize racism when I see or hear it.
- Stereotypes and prejudice can be eliminated from our society.
- Racism must be confronted.
- Everyone is born equal.
- Racism is perpetuated by social hierarchies.
- Character matters.
- You are a reflection of the people you surround yourself with.
- Everyone’s lot in life is the same.
- If you speak loud enough, people will listen.
- Every human is entitled to the same rights.
- Rights and responsibilities are the same.
- We have a duty to protect the rights of others.
- Human rights are only a problem in nondemocratic countries.
- Our political (or justice) system serves everyone equally.
- All are free to dream without fear.
- Everything will always turn out well in the end.
- Time solves all problems—you just have to wait long enough.
- You must stand up for what you believe in.
- Everything happens for a reason.