

## **The Can We Project 2024: Preserving Civil Discourse in Trying Times**

In this day and age, engaging in political discussions can feel overwhelming or sometimes flat out impossible. As a country, we are more divided now than we have ever been, and, entering into a highly contested election, sometimes it can feel easier to avoid politics altogether, or to put on blinders and keep your thoughts to yourself.

At MeANS, for the second year in a row, we are striving to humanize civic engagement, building a cohort of 20 students and faculty who will build their empathy for each other and for the differing opinions in our community, while developing an understanding of the complexity and nuance of how each of us as individuals are far more than any singular political belief we might hold.

With the help of the program's director, John Holdridge, and Jake Posik of the Maine Policy Institute, we began this journey a few weeks ago, gathering in our yurt on campus to share about personal values such as how we define "family" and the importance of the natural world in our lives. As the afternoon went on, students had the chance to listen deeply to each other's stories about moments of change in their lives, and wrapped up the day talking through local issues in Education, Healthcare, Gun Control, and the Environment.

Over the course of the year, students will meet monthly to focus on revitalizing our democracy and empowering our students, faculty, and local community members to sit and listen to each other before labeling or writing each other off. In December, we will have the chance to join 15 other schools at the Augusta Civic Center to take on a collection of community-building workshops, and to have students meet and interact with a wide variety of young people from across the state. And in March, we will join another school in taking action on statewide political issues, and put our conversations into action.

This work isn't easy. Often, it is just as much unlearning some of our default ways of reacting to each other as it is learning new ways of listening and responding. But what has already held true is that we as a community have a unique opportunity to support and uplift what MeANS stands for as a school and to hold onto the values that we share in common above the hatred and violence that has become more and more common in our politics today.

A huge thank you to the 15 brave students who have embarked on this journey, and stay tuned for more from Augusta in December!

Sincerely,  
Evan Coleman