

TEACHING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL / SENSITIVE ISSUES

American academic tradition stresses the free contest of ideas as a vital element both in the development of curriculum and in classroom teaching.

Teaching Controversial Issues

Training in reflective and responsive thinking may be incorporated in course offerings at all grade levels. This training is impossible, or at least severely hampered, if the community does not respect the principles of freedom and recognize that dissent enriches debate and is at the heart of the American tradition. The District encourages debate that challenges ideas and exposes students to divergent views, consistent with the following guidelines.

A. It is the responsibility of the schools to make provision for the study of controversial issues.

1. The policy on controversial issues should be defined in terms of the rights of students, rather than in terms of the rights of teachers.
2. The study should be emphasized in the high school, when most students are mature enough to study the significant controversial issues facing our society.
3. The study should be objective and scholarly with a minimum emphasis on opinion and a maximum emphasis on facts.
4. Discussion of controversial issues will be within the context of approved curricula and in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

B. In the study of controversial issues the students have the following rights:

1. The right to study any controversial issue which has political, economic, or social significance and concerning which (at the appropriate level) he/she should begin to have an opinion;
2. The right to have access to all relevant information and materials located in the school library and computers as guided by the Acceptable Use Policy;
3. The right to form and express opinions on controversial issues without thereby jeopardizing relations with the teacher or the school;
4. The right to study under competent instruction in an atmosphere free from bias and prejudice.

C. The teacher employs the same methods in handling controversial issues as characterize the best teaching at any time.

1. No educator is allowed to promote, or give the appearance of promoting, a particular viewpoint or belief.
2. Teachers should be constantly mindful of their position of considerable influence in the classroom setting. Restraint and careful judgment must be exercised in stating personal opinions to which students might ascribe more weight than is intended, that might distort or

destroy the objectivity of viewpoints, or that might be interpreted as prejudiced, slanderous, or self-serving.

3. The teacher does not use the classroom as a personal forum. He/she does not employ the techniques of the demagogue or the propagandist for attention, for control, or simply for color. The teacher has the right to identify and express his/her own point of view in the classroom as long as he/she indicates clearly that it is his/her own.
4. The teacher, in selecting both the content and the method of instruction, is mindful of the maturity level of the students.
5. The teacher has assured him/herself that the controversial subject to be discussed belongs within the framework of the curriculum to be covered, that the subject is significant as well as meaningful for the students, and that through the discussion, students will have the opportunity to grow.
6. The teacher handles the classroom presentations in ways which will ensure a wide range of information and interpretation for the students' consideration and strives to present a balance among many points of view.
7. The teacher emphasizes keeping an open mind, basing one's judgment on known facts, looking closely at facts to evaluate them in terms of the subject under discussion, and being ready to change one's opinion should new facts come into light.
8. The emphasis always is on the method of forming an opinion as much as on the opinion formed.
9. At the teacher's discretion, a notice to parents may be sent home, informing the parents of the subject matter to be discussed and the dates of the classroom discussion. Some discussions may occur unexpectedly and may be addressed if the teacher, using appropriate judgment, feels it is relevant to the course of instruction.

Cross Reference: IMBB – Exemption from Required Instruction
 IB – Academic Freedom
 AD – Educational Philosophy / Mission
 ADF – School District Commitment to Learning Results
 IGA – Curriculum Development and Adoption
 IL – Evaluation of Instructional Programs
 ILA – Student Assessment / Local Assessment System
 IJJ – Instruction and Library Materials Selection
 GBG – Staff Participation in Political Activities

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