



TEACHING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

Boards of Education are granted control of instruction by the Colorado State Constitution. The Board of Education of the Boulder Valley Schools accepts that responsibility but recognizes that the professional competence of the teacher is the most important factor in ensuring appropriate treatment of controversial issues. To provide guidance for teachers and others involved in the educational treatment of controversial issues, the Board of Education has adopted the following policy statements.

Contemporary society is characterized by differences of opinion arising from conflicts of values and belief which become controversial issues within the community. It is the responsibility of public education in a pluralistic, democratic society to provide for the treatment of controversial issues in a setting that allows free expression of opinion, promotes rational thought, and provides adequate learning resources.

Students should be encouraged to accept the basic freedom and responsibility to think and to learn about the issues and concerns of their society. Teaching about controversial issues is of significant educational value for these reasons:

1. Free discussion is the heart of the democratic process.
2. Controversial issues, duly selected for their educational value, age appropriateness, and congruence with adopted curricula are intrinsically relevant to an educational program that seeks to provide students with the means to become participating citizens.
3. Critical thinking and decision-making concerning both controversial and noncontroversial topics are basic processes which must be developed for effective citizenship.
4. The study of controversial issues promotes student involvement in the commitment to learning, and thus makes for effective learning.

Controversial Issues Defined

Controversial issues are defined as public issues that are relevant to the adopted curriculum but are not prescribed as topics, processes, or strategies within the curriculum. These issues generate sufficient attention and interest to result in identifiable opposing or varying points

of view about which no consensus is achieved in the community. An issue becomes controversial when conflict is generated between proposed solutions and strong interests, deep beliefs, and close group affiliations. Within the instructional setting, almost any topic may be considered controversial by any given individual. Controversial issues are not to be construed as those topics which only incidentally and indirectly touch the personal biases, beliefs, or values of individuals. Nor are they particularly associated with personality conflicts, disciplinary problems, or professional grievances. Finally, teaching about controversial issues within the scope of this policy presumes a planned inquiry into such issues and not impromptu or incidental classroom discussion.

Responsibilities

Teaching about controversial issues, all of which are likely to contain a significant emotional element, requires the recognition and acceptance of responsibilities by all persons concerned, including students, teachers, administrators, and patrons of the District.

1. Students. Student responsibilities begin with a willingness to examine objectively one's own point of view and to make a concerted effort to understand the reasons for differing points of view. Such willingness is basic to working effectively with others on issues of common concern but with divergent possible solutions. Responsibilities relating to this basic premise are further emphasized in the recognition that honest people may differ without malice, without the disruption of emotional outburst, and without impugning the character or integrity of those who have differing opinions.

2. Teachers. The effectiveness of the educational program in achieving the objectives set forth in this policy statement is primarily dependent upon the classroom teachers. In this regard, specific responsibilities of the teacher are:

- a. To determine the appropriateness of the issue with respect to the curriculum, course objectives, and the knowledge, maturity, and ability of the students.
- b. To advise the principal regarding the planned study of a controversial issue and to consult with the principal concerning the appropriateness of the proposal.
- c. To make provision for suitable instructional materials and adequate time to give reasonably thorough coverage of the topic, and otherwise to present the issues after adequate planning and preparation.
- d. To provide alternate projects for those students whose involvement would constitute a serious burden of conscience.
- e. To be sensitive to feelings in the community and judicious in treatment of the controversial issue.

- f. To maintain an active concern for the rights and feelings of individuals, including the right to privacy.
- g. To demonstrate by teaching style and instructional demeanor a commitment to the methods of objective inquiry in group activities.
- h. To project in the most positive way his or her personal and professional adherence to practices which reflect respect for the dignity of the individual.
- i. To ensure a balanced presentation through the careful selection of materials, guest speakers, and other instructional resources.
- j. To label his or her opinion as such when it is expressed as a personal point of view.
- k. To teach students those skills required for the analysis of complex issues and to provide a classroom environment in which students feel comfortable developing and expressing their own points of view.

3. Administration. The building principal shall have the following responsibilities:

- a. To consult with the teachers concerning the appropriateness of proposed content and methods of teaching about controversial issues.
- b. To maintain a general atmosphere conducive to dealing with controversial issues.
- c. To support and protect teachers from undue and unjustified criticism that might arise from dealing with controversial issues in the classroom.
- d. To ensure that the instructional program is not exploited by special interest groups or pressure tactics. (This does not preclude the utilization of guest speakers to present different points of view as long as the prior approval of the principal is secured.)

4. Patrons. Patrons of the Boulder Valley Public Schools are responsible:

- a. To recognize that it is the responsibility of the school to present controversial issues appropriate to the curriculum.
- b. To refrain from attempting to suppress the teaching about controversial issues, assuming that the guidelines of responsibility and appropriateness have been followed.
- c. To inform the teacher, principal, and other appropriate personnel when they have information that indicates controversial issues are being dealt with in an inappropriate manner.

Complaint Procedures

Any person having a complaint related to any matter within the scope of this policy may seek review through the procedures set forth in Policy KLB, Public Complaints About the Curriculum or Instructional Materials or Strategies.

CROSS REFS: IB, Academic Freedom

IIAA subcodes (all pertain to instructional materials)

KLB, Public Complaints About the Curriculum or Instructional Materials or Strategies

End of File: INB