

Instruction

Controversial Issues Instruction to Promote Critical Thinking

Introduction

The Board believes the intelligent discussion of vital current public issues, often containing the element of controversy, is an important part of the education of youth for effective citizenship in our country. The democratic process itself is the resolving of controversy in an orderly fashion. Every American student has the right and responsibility to examine pertinent issues without prejudice. Only through an appreciation of all-sides multiple perspectives of a given issue can the student gain the wisdom to choose intelligently between proposed alternatives.

The Board also recognizes that students, having an awareness of current issues or issues related to their personal well-being, may raise questions or concerns that are unanticipated and unrelated to the curriculum. Whether these concerns are raised within the context of the curricula or to an adult outside of the context of the curricula, the student will be referred to the most qualified staff member to hear the student's concern and encourage research on the topic to study the issue.

Free inquiry in a democratic society requires that controversial issues arising in the classroom be handled as a regular aspect of instruction and learning in such a way as to not inhibit the dignity, the personality, or the intellectual integrity of either teachers or students.

Definitions

Controversial issues: Significant academic, social, political, and ideological matters about which there exists opposing viewpoints and/or multiple perspectives.

Curriculum: The prescribed elements of programs and courses which state clearly and specifically what students are to know and be able to do, how well they will be able to do it, and how they will meet the learning objectives and by what means they will be assessed.

Guidelines

When providing instruction related to a controversial issue, the following guidelines shall apply:

- The topic shall be suitable to the age and maturity of the students.
- Instruction shall be presented in a balanced manner, addressing all-sides- multiple perspectives of the issue without bias or prejudice and without promoting any particular point of view.
- In the classroom, teachers act on behalf of the District and are expected to follow the adopted curriculum. In leading or guiding class discussions about issues that may be controversial, a teacher may not advocate his/her personal opinion or viewpoint. When necessary, the Superintendent or his/her designee may instruct teachers to refrain from sharing personal views in the classroom on controversial topics.
- Students shall be assured of their right to form and express an opinion without jeopardizing their grades or being subject to discrimination, retaliation, or discipline, provided the viewpoint

does not constitute harassment, threats, intimidation, or bullying or is otherwise unlawful.

- Students shall be informed of conduct expected during such instruction and the importance of being courteous and respectful of the opinions of others.
- Adequate factual information shall be provided to help students objectively analyze multiple perspectives, evaluate the issue and draw their own conclusions.
- The instruction shall not reflect adversely upon persons because of their race, ethnicity, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, religion, or any other basis prohibited by law.

When a guest speaker is invited to make a presentation related to a controversial issue, the Superintendent or designee shall notify him/her of this policy and the expectations and goals regarding the instruction. If the guest speaker is presenting only one point of view on an issue, the teacher shall be responsible for ensuring that students also receive information on opposing viewpoints.

When required by law, as in regards to comprehensive sexual health and HIV prevention education, and animal dissection, parents/guardians shall be notified prior to instruction that they may request in writing that their child be excused from the instruction. Students whose parents/guardians decline such instruction will be offered an alternative activity of similar educational value.

Students

Specific responsibilities of the students are:

- To research, study and discuss curricular issues and to reach judgments and express opinions without jeopardizing his/her relationship with classmates or teachers.
- To learn in an open classroom and school climate so that they feel free to examine all aspects of a curricular topic and/or resource.
- To study with competent instruction in an impartial atmosphere and have access to relevant material.
- To conduct research in an atmosphere free from bias and prejudice.
- To be protected against indoctrination, whether it be political, social, economic, religious, or other.
- To assure that when topics with multiple perspectives are being discussed in the classroom, every effort is being made to present various viewpoints fairly, impartially and discreetly.

~~Such free discussion requires that students have at least four rights:~~

- ~~1. The right to study any controversial issue which has political, economic or social significance and concerning which the student, at his/her level should begin to have an opinion~~
- ~~2. The right to have free access to all relevant information, including the materials that circulate freely in the community~~
- ~~3. The right to study under competent instruction in an atmosphere free from bias and prejudice~~

~~4. The right to form and express his/her own opinions on controversial issues without thereby jeopardizing the student's relations with the teacher or the school.~~

~~The discussion and study of controversial issues shall be objective and scholarly and linked to existing curriculum with a minimum emphasis on opinion. The teacher shall approach controversial issues in the classroom in an impartial and unprejudiced manner, and must refrain from using classroom privileges and prestige to promote a partisan point of view.~~

~~Instructional policy on controversial issues is here stated by the Board of Education in order to protect teachers and school administrators from unwarranted attack by pressure groups, and to insure youth a well-balanced preparation for American citizenship.~~

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, the specific responsibilities of the teacher are:

- To determine the appropriateness of the issue with respect to the curriculum, course objectives, and the knowledge, maturity, and the ability of the students.
- To make provisions 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.
- To be sensitive to feeling in the community and judicious in treatment of the controversial issue.
- To maintain an active concern for the rights and feelings of individuals, including the right to privacy.
- To demonstrate by teaching style and instructional demeanor a commitment to the methods of objective inquiry in group activities.
- To project in the most positive way their personal and professional adherence to practice which reflect respect for the dignity of the individual.
- To ensure a balanced presentation through the careful selection of materials, guest speakers, and other instructional resources.
- To label their opinion as such when it is expressed as a personal point of view.
- 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.

Teachers, who in the performance of their teaching duties, are engaged in the study or discussion of such controversial issues shall be defended by the Board and District from unjust or unfair criticism or legal actions.

The Board's position on this matter applies to the regular curriculum of the schools and to extra-curricular activities before and after school, within the school building or outside of the school, whenever school or school-sponsored or sanctioned groups are involved. The Board reserves the right to exercise significant discretion in determining the content of school curriculum within the limitations provided by law.

Selection of Controversial Issues

The following guidelines, while not all inclusive, should assist teachers in deciding whether or not a given controversial issue should be considered:

1. — Is the controversial issue timely and is it significant? Some issues are quite transitory. They arise rather rapidly, create a great deal of excitement and almost as quickly disappear. The teacher should attempt to select those issues which have a bearing on long-range problems.
2. — Is the controversial issue appropriate to the academic level and maturity of the students?
3. — Does the student have access to materials which will provide significant bearing on the controversial issue being discussed?
4. — Can the issue be adequately considered in the time available? It is sometimes better not to raise questions that cannot be properly explored than to create a situation of hasty, ill-informed discussion. Superficial treatment of important questions usually defeats the purpose of introducing them.
5. — Is the controversial issue being discussed related to the course of study?
6. — Some issues do not have a proper place in the classroom that seeks to educate all children with public funds. The teacher should use sound judgment and tact in selecting those controversial topics and will accomplish the objectives of teaching them rather than defeating those objectives. For example, the following should be avoided:
 - a. — The rationale or values of any religious faith
 - b. — Subjects whose consideration would give serious offense to large segments of the community.
 - c. — Subjects that will strongly divide a community and consideration of which may lead to misinterpretation and even partisan pressures. In cases of doubt, the teacher should seek guidance of more experienced colleagues, his/her immediate supervisor, or an administrator.
 - d. — Young and immature minds should not be subjected to persuasive or vigorous argumentation or presentation by persons with a known and strong bias.
7. — The teacher's responsibilities include the achievement of a scholarly competence, the teaching of controversy as controversy, opinion as opinion, to teach the truth, and to admit ignorance when the truth is not known.

In the study of controversial issues, indoctrination shall not be the purpose; rather, the purpose shall be to have the student see as fully as possible all sides of the question or issue.
8. — The responsibility of maintaining and manifesting at all times a decent respect for the dignity and worth of each individual is paramount.

Administration

The Curriculum Director shall have the following responsibilities:

1. To consult with the teachers concerning the appropriateness of the proposed content and methods of teaching about controversial issues.
2. To maintain a general atmosphere conducive to dealing with controversial issues.
3. To support and protect teachers from undue and unjustified criticism that might arise from dealing with controversial issues in the classroom.
4. 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.)

Parents/Guardians

Parents/guardians of students in the District are responsible:

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

(cf. 0521.1 – Grievance Procedure-Title IX/Rehabilitation Act, section 504)

(cf. 0521.2 - Commitment to Religious Neutrality)

(cf. 1220—Citizens' Advisory Committees)

(cf. 1312 - Public Complaints)

(cf. 4118.21 – Professional Responsibilities)

(cf. 5131.911 - Bullying)

(cf. 5145.2 - Freedom of Speech/Expression)

(cf. 6141 - Curriculum Design/Development/Revision)

(cf. 6141.2 – Separation of Church and State)

(cf. 6142.1 - Family Life and Sex Education)

(cf. 6142.10 - Health Education)

(cf. 6144.1 - Exemption from Instruction)

(cf. 6145.5 - Organizations/Associations-Equal Access)

(cf. 6160 - Instructional Resources)

(cf. 6161 - Equipment, Books and Materials)

(cf. 6161.1 - Evaluation of Instructional Materials)

(cf. 6162.51 -Surveys of Students)

(cf. 6177 - Use of Commercially Produced Video/DVD Recordings)

Legal Reference: Connecticut General Statutes

31-51q Liability of employer for discipline or discharge of employee on account of employee's exercise of certain constitutional rights.

Keyishian v. Board of Regents 395 U.S. 589, 603 (1967)

Academic Freedom Policy (adopted by Connecticut State Board of Education, 9/9/81)

[Garcetti v. Ceballos, \(2006\) 547 U.S. 410](#)

[Johnson v. Poway Unified School District, \(2011\) 658 F.3d 954 \(9th Cir.\)](#)

[Mayer v. Monroe County Community School Corporation, \(2007\) 474 F.3d 477 \(7th Cir.\)](#)

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HAMDEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Hamden, Connecticut