

Instruction

Controversial Topics

The Amity Regional School District No. 5 (ARSD) Board of Education (Board) believes the intelligent discussion of vital current public topics leads to the development of an inspiring school culture of understanding and inclusion and prepares students for citizenship. Discussing controversial topics helps students with different backgrounds to learn to live and work together peacefully and respectfully. It encourages them to listen to each other and talk through their differences sensitively. It also challenges them to think critically about their own beliefs and values and gives them confidence and skills to express these publicly.

The Board holds that one of the fundamental purposes of education is to teach students how to think critically, evaluate, and take a position when confronted with alternative choices. Therefore, schools have an obligation to allow students a forum for examination and discussion of controversial topics which arise in connection with the instructional program. A topic shall be considered controversial if it is socially unresolved, generates highly divergent opinions, and may be considered an unsuitable curriculum topic by some members of the community.

The Board recognizes the role of public education in preparing students for effective citizenship. Consequently, the instructional program to achieve this purpose must appropriately address the responsibilities of living in a pluralistic society. The Board supports the examination of controversial topics related to the Board-approved curriculum in an impartial and objective manner. Controversial topics in the classroom shall be handled as a regular aspect of instruction and learning in such a way as to support the dignity, the personality, and the intellectual integrity of teachers and students. The examination of controversial topics shall occur in inclusive and supportive learning environments that encourage respect for multiple perspectives.

The historic principle of academic freedom grants and protects the teacher's right to raise and reasonably treat controversial topics in the carrying out of approved school system curricular policies. It is the duty of the educational community to model for our students the consideration of diverse ideas and respect for civil discourse. It is incumbent upon educators to establish an emotionally safe environment for students to explore new ideas. Teachers are responsible for instruction in varied perspectives; engaging students in critical thinking; and facilitating students' discovery of their own ideals and thoughts, all while modeling respectful dialogue and authentic inquiry.

ARSD teachers, as beneficiaries of the legal rights established in the historic principle of academic freedom, have the right to teach students in ways that best utilize their professional knowledge, academic interests, and competencies. Teachers must be keenly aware of their position of influence and that the classroom is not a forum to promote a particular political vantage point. No statute or court decision has approved of teacher actions or statements that substantially interfere with the reasonable requirements of school discipline or established curriculum. The guarantees of free speech or the doctrine of academic freedom have never been recognized by the courts as vehicles to allow teachers to violate an established and reasonably well-defined curriculum or to create or modify curriculum programs according to his/her beliefs.

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ARSD students have the right to discuss controversial topics as an essential part of their education. To these ends the Board recognizes the place of controversial topics in the educational experience of its students, provided that such topics are studied under competent instruction in an atmosphere free from bias and prejudice; that they are relevant to the course of study in which they are studied; that they are appropriate learning objectives for the academic level and maturity of the students; and that the topic in question is taught objectively, equitably, and as accurately as possible.

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)

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.)

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