

## **Instruction**

### **Controversial Issues**

#### **Introduction**

Open, constructive dialogue about issues of public concern is a hallmark of lifelong learning and responsible citizenship. This includes the discussion of controversial social, political, and economic topics and policies.

The Board of Education (Board) believes in the following principles, honoring teachers' academic freedom as well as students' individual identities:

1. The District shall create a safe, inclusive learning environment where students are able to participate freely in academic dialogue as speakers and listeners. The school environment shall be used to provide balanced information and ideas on issues of opinion so that student may formulate their own positions and opinions.
2. Schools and classrooms are an environment where students must feel physically and emotionally safe. The District aspires to create a climate in which students consistently feel a sense of belonging and membership. Therefore, the schools must be a place free from a discourse that is intentionally harmful toward others or expresses hatred, bigotry, bias, or otherwise is reasonably intentionally hurtful to others.

It is the duty of the educational community to model for our students the ideals of acceptance of diversity and respect for civil discourse. It is incumbent upon educators to establish an emotionally safe environment for students to explore new ideas. It is our role to teach varied ideologies and political perspectives; engage students in critical thinking; and facilitate students' discovery of their own ideals and thoughts, all while modeling respectful dialogue and authentic inquiry.

At times, due to the nature of public discourse, educators may be reluctant to engage in discussion of controversial topics in an effort to avoid the perception of bias or judgment. 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. As partners in our students' education, we shall aspire to promote healthy, authentic dialogue in our classrooms and corridors.

#### **Definition of a Controversial Issue**

An idea, viewpoint or topic can be considered controversial if, "a number of people disagree about statements and assertions made in connection with the proposition. Issues that deeply divide a society, that generate conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative value systems, are considered controversial." The scope of issues that might be considered controversial is quite broad. The content of these issues may vary from local problems to issues international in scale.

## **Engagement of Students in Learning About and Discussing Controversial Issues**

### **The inclusion of controversial topics in the curriculum helps to:**

- Develop students' critical thinking skills;
- Improve interpersonal skills, and
- Prepare students for their roles as contributors to a pluralistic democracy.

The productive treatment of controversial subjects demands a classroom climate conducive to the free expression of ideas. This should include the opportunity to hear a wide range of views, student freedom to express ideas, and teacher willingness to discuss ideas. Additional considerations include the following:

#### **A. Selection of Issues**

Topics of classroom discussion should, first and foremost, always be driven to the District curriculum. In selecting discussion issues, teachers should also consider their students' interest, experience, and expertise regarding the issue; the relevance of issues to their students' lives; their students' maturity level; and the significance of the issue to society.

#### **B. Preparation of Students for Discussion**

Teachers should invest time to train their students in discussion techniques. Teachers and students cooperatively determine guidelines for interaction, and both realize that to establish a rhythm and flow of discussions will take practice and patience.

Ensuring that students are adequately prepared to handle an issue in a discussion format requires that teachers provide informational resources and that students have an opportunity to acquire background knowledge prior to the discussion. Background information may be provided through readings, lectures, films, guest speakers, or field trips.

#### **C. Establishment of an Open Discussion Climate**

The creation of an intellectually safe environment for student participation is one of the most important elements of successful discussions. Teachers should model appropriate discussion behaviors by carefully listening to and respecting students' contributions. Teachers should tolerate widely divergent views and encourage the expression of them in order to establish a non-threatening arena for the exposition of ideas. Students must understand that they may not interrupt each other's comments and that they may disagree without being disagreeable.

**Engagement of Students in Learning About and Discussing Controversial Issues** (continued)

**D. Maintenance of Focus and Direction**

District teachers should work to provide the necessary structure for constructive discussions. An agenda for the discussion might include defining the problem, summarizing and analyzing evidence, suggesting possible solutions, hypothesizing consequences of solutions, and relating the issue to the personal experience of the students.

**E. Intellectual Balance, Encouraging Equal Participation**

A primary role of the teacher in facilitating the learning of curriculum and moderating classroom discussions is to ensure that students are exposed to the full range of perspectives on any issue considered. Teachers should actively solicit a wide array of opinions about discussed issues, and expose students to a fair hearing of competing points of view. If important viewpoints on a given issue are not expressed, they may be elicited through careful questioning; or they may be provided by asking students to role-play someone who would present that perspective. To achieve a level of balanced participation it is often necessary to actively draw reticent students into the discussion and to limit the contributions of more outspoken students. The establishment of a participation system is generally helpful in addressing this problem.

**F. Guiding Principles**

Above all, the District objective is to allow students to figure out their views about, and stance on issues themselves. The Board believes effectively and responsibly addressing controversial issues in the educational process provides a unique opportunity to partner with families. To that end, the Board pledges its commitment to these guiding principles:

- We aim to create a safe, inclusive learning environment where students are able to participate freely in academic dialogue as speakers and listeners.
- Schools and classrooms are an environment where students feel physically and emotionally safe. We aspire to create a climate where students consistently feel a sense of belonging and membership.
- We respect the inquisitiveness of learners as well as the family and community belief systems which they bring to school.
- The US Constitution is the law of the land and a cornerstone of our curriculum. We aim to present relevant features of the US Constitution in timely and meaningful contexts. In the spirit of the Constitution, we underscore that all students, regardless of their opinion or conviction, warrant respect.
- We are open and available to help students with any confusion they may experience in the process of debate, whether that be with educators or their peers. Students should feel free to seek out the support of a guidance counselor, teacher, or administrator if they feel the need to discuss any issue.

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

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NEW LONDON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

New London, Connecticut