

Guidance regarding the Teaching and Discussing of Political, Religious, and other Potentially Controversial Issues in the Classroom

It is not our job to teach our students what to think; it is our job to teach our students how to think.

The Pittsford Central School District wishes to foster an environment where staff members engage in practices that promote positive educational experiences, allows students to grow socially and academically, and encourages healthy dialogue in respectful ways. This is particularly important as we model how to respectfully disagree with one another, seek to understand one another's viewpoint, and always demonstrate empathy and respect. We live in a time where social and political issues make their ways into our schools and it is our responsibility to set parameters surrounding the best ways to broach these challenges.

Our students need to learn the skill set of how to contend with differing viewpoints. Opportunities should be provided within the instructional program to study controversial issues that support the curriculum. In order for the students to gain a greater understanding of such topics, instructional presentations should be objective and scholarly with a minimum emphasis on opinion. The teacher must approach the issue in an impartial and unprejudicial manner and must refrain from using the classroom to promote a partisan point of view. All sides to any issue should be presented in a balanced manner so that students experience the diverse views that make the topic a controversial issue. Teachers are encouraged to get beyond slogans and talking points in an effort to focus on the issues. When selecting such topics, teachers should be sensitive to the maturity level of the students.

The District requires that the school environment be honest, respectful, caring and safe, and that diversity be recognized, accepted, and promoted through inclusive practices. This includes diversity of thought. At the same time, the District and its employees will maintain official neutrality when discussing politics or politically associated topics.

The success and productivity of any discussion in a classroom is contingent on a positive, supportive, respectful, and trusting relationship between and among teachers and students. Prior to engaging students in work centered on controversial topics, teachers should have taken the time to develop positive relationships within the classroom community and to establish norms that will support safe and meaningful dialogue. Students should never be put on the spot or forced to share, or adopt, a particular viewpoint or stance on an issue.

During instructional time students may express personal beliefs regarding controversial issues as long as the expression is relevant to the activity or curriculum under discussion, and is done so in an appropriate manner which is in keeping with the district's Code of Conduct and reflects the dignity and respect expected within the classroom culture. Student conduct or expression permitted in homework, classroom discussions, presentations, assignments, or District sponsored activities may include:

- Making remarks, sharing personal viewpoints, or asking questions about controversial issues in the ordinary course of classroom discussion.
- Submitting homework, artwork, or other assignments with political, religious, or otherwise potentially controversial content.
- Giving class presentations with controversial content that is relevant to the curriculum and matters being discussed.
- Independent reading of books or materials that may be associated with a controversial issue to themselves.

Teachers should consider the following when approaching, or responding to, sensitive, political or controversial topics:

- The importance of fostering the development of Pittsford's Next Generation Skills, particularly:
 - Critical thinking and Problem Solving
 - Information Literacy and Research
 - Communication and Collaboration

- Ensuring that all discussions/experiences in the classroom are directly correlated to the curriculum that forms the basis for the course, including content standards and skills. Examples include, but are not limited to:
 - The New York State Social Studies Framework
 - Social Studies Content standards
 - Social Studies Practice A (Gathering, Interpreting and Using Evidence) and F (Civic Participation) in particular provide competencies related to the exploration of controversial issues that students need opportunities to practice and develop under the guidance of a skillful teacher.
 - The New York State Next Generation English/Language Arts Standards
 - ELA Content standards (Reading Anchor Standards 1-4, 7 and 8 may be particularly relevant, as well as Writing Anchor Standards 1, 5, 6, and 7)
 - Lifelong Practices of Readers and Writers
 - The New York State Learning Standards for Health

- The establishment of a safe, supportive, and respectful learning environment where all students can state their opinions, ask questions, and engage in meaningful dialogue grounded in critical thinking and empathy.
 - New York State's Social Emotional Learning Competencies: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, Responsible Decision-Making

References:

- [Policy/Regulation 8331: Controversial Issues](#)
- [Policy/Regulation 8360: Religious Expression in the Instructional Program](#)
- [Policy 8241: Patriotism, Civility, Citizenship And Character Education/Interpersonal Violence Prevention Education](#)
- [PCSD Code of Conduct](#)
- [New York State K-12 Social Studies Framework](#)
- [New York State Next Generation English Language Arts Learning Standards](#)
- [New York State Learning Standards for Health](#)
- [New York State Social Emotional Learning](#)
- [PCSD Next Generation Skills](#)