

THE TEACHING OF CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

The public schools of the United States have the responsibility to educate students to be informed, conscientious citizens, capable of self-direction and critical thinking. In training young people to become effective citizens in our democracy, students must be given the opportunity to develop the ability to gain information about public issues, to evaluate facts, and to express themselves through discussion, writing, and the ballot.

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 of a given issue can the student gain the wisdom to choose intelligently between proposed alternatives.

Definition of a Controversial Issue: An issue is controversial when the question is debatable and when some of its proposed solutions conflict with the intellectual or emotional commitments of citizens to cherished interests, beliefs, or group loyalties.

Purposes of the Study of Controversial Issues: The study of an issue should provide opportunities for students to develop techniques of examining any controversial issue and should strengthen or change their individual commitment to viewpoints reached through independent, systematic research.

Investigation of significant issues should strengthen the student's ability and will to study any complex life situation. It should enable him/her to recognize the necessity for, and the value of, differing viewpoints and to appreciate the role of controversy as an instrument of progress.

The study of such issues shall have as its purpose the development of the following skills and attitudes:

1. The desire and ability to study relevant problems and to make intelligent choices from alternatives.
2. The desire and ability to use rational methods in considering significant issues.
3. The willingness to recognize that differing viewpoints are valuable and normal.
4. The recognition that reasonable compromise is often an important part of the democratic decision-making process.
5. The skill of analyzing and evaluating sources of information, recognizing propaganda, half truths, and bias.

Periodically, the administrator should discuss the teaching of controversial issues with staff members.

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If a teacher is in doubt regarding the appropriateness of discussing certain controversial issues in the classroom or regarding the ability to handle such issues, the teacher should confer with the principal. If the matter cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of the principal, the matter may be referred to the appropriate district administrator.

No out-of-school group or individual has the right to present arguments for or against any issue under study directly to the students or to the class. The teacher may invite representatives of different viewpoints to appear before the class and discuss opinions, after obtaining approval of the principal.

Whenever, in the minds of individual citizens or community groups, there is disapproval of the materials of instruction or the procedures employed by teachers or students in choosing, presenting, or carrying out the study of controversial issues, the matter should be presented to the local school administrator who may request completion of the District Form C-8 *Request for Review of Educational Materials or Procedures*. If a hearing before the Board is desirable, procedures are to be followed in accordance with district policy.

Responsibilities of Teachers: The study of controversial issues should always be based on the foundation of positive instruction leading to a belief in the ideals and processes of American democracy and to the understanding of ideas and methods which are contrary to American democracy. Proposed solutions should be tested in the light of democratic ideals, concern for the worth of the individual and for the common welfare and recognition of fair play and emphasis on peaceful, constitutional methods of achieving progress.

Knowing the policy of the district and making full use this knowledge and of an understanding of the students, the school, and, the community, the teacher should:

1. Be thoroughly informed on the subject under discussion before presenting an issue.
2. Follow the requirements on prohibited instruction as contained in the California State Education Code.
3. Instruction shall be presented in a balanced manner, addressing all sides of the issue without bias or prejudice and without promoting any particular point of view.
4. Select or guide students in the selection of topics.
5. Choose suitable and useful instructional materials.
6. Stimulate students to make use of a wide variety of materials and experiences, both in and out of the classroom.
7. Be able to explain their significance by pointing out possible missing arguments, interpretations, and points of view.

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8. Provide experiences in recognizing and evaluating the consequences of alternatives.
9. Promote, in all possible ways, student interest in and appreciation of rational methods of considering issues and arriving at decisions.
10. No student's viewpoint shall be suppressed, provided such expression is not malicious or abusive toward others. Students shall be assured of their right to form and express an opinion without jeopardizing their relationship with the teacher or school.
11. Direct class discussion to cover all points of view.
12. Distinguish between teaching and advocating, and refrain from using classroom teacher influence to promote partisan or sectarian viewpoints.

Classroom Techniques for Handling Controversial Issues: The handling of controversial issues in the classroom requires skills which are basic to the solving of all problems. When consideration of a controversial issue is looked upon as problem-solving, it is possible to break down the process into a number of steps.

Rights of Students: For public schools, policy on controversial issues is defined in terms of the rights of students. The student has four basic rights to be recognized:

1. The right to study any controversial issue which has political, economic, or social significance and concerning which, at the student's age/and maturity level, the student 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 or prejudice.
4. The right to form and express individual opinions on controversial issues without jeopardizing relations with teachers or others.

The Selection of Issues: In general, the decision as to whether a controversial issue should become a matter of school study should be based upon the following criteria:

1. It must contribute significantly to the objectives of the curriculum.
2. The issue must be within the range of students' interests, experience, maturity, culture, and competence.

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3. The issue must have a meaningful relationship to the matters of concern to students at the time it is studied.
4. There must be adequate time to justify its presentation.
5. The issue must be one which the teacher feels competent to handle.
6. The issue must involve alternate points of view which can be understood and defined by students.
7. The issue must be one about which information is present and available so alternatives can be discussed and evaluated on a factual and reasonable basis.
8. The issue must be one which the community as a whole would not find objectionable.
9. The issue must involve the emotions of the students sufficiently to interest them, but not to such an extent that they are unable to study it rationally.
10. The issue must provide opportunity for critical thinking for the development and the understanding of conflicting points of view, at the same time that it aligns to the prescribed course of study, state standards and not prohibited by law.

When a guest speaker is invited to make a presentation related to a controversial issue, the Board requires that he/she be notified 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.

(cf. 6145.8 - Assemblies and Special Events)

When required by law or otherwise deemed appropriate by the teacher or administrator, parents/guardians shall be notified prior to instruction related to any controversial issue and parent/guardian consent shall be obtained for student participation. Students whose parents/guardians decline such instruction may be offered the option to participate in an alternative activity of similar value.

A student or parent/guardian with concerns regarding instruction about controversial issues shall be directed to appropriate district complaint procedures.

(cf. 1312.1 - Complaints Concerning District Employees)

(cf. 1312.2 - Complaints Concerning Instructional Materials)

Regulation
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POWAY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
San Diego, California