

() Required
(X) Local
() Notice

TEACHING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

The Board of Education recognizes its broad responsibility for providing for a course of study in the schools that is appropriate to the readiness of the students in the district. The Board also recognizes that within the broad parameters of curriculum, a teacher must be free to engage the classroom in discussion and debate in order to stimulate the exchange of ideas and critical thinking. The goal is for students to learn to disagree respectfully, discuss, and examine issues rationally, objectively and thoroughly, to enable students to draw informed conclusions, and function productively and with civility in our democratic society.

The Board also acknowledges that schools do not exist in a vacuum; they are part of communities and wider societies. Controversial issues are those, which deal with matters about which there are varying levels of opposing or conflicting views, biases, emotions, and/or opinions. Controversial topics will always exist in our world as long as people have differing opinions. The Board permits teachers to address controversial topics in schools, which are related to the approved curriculum, to provide a safe, supportive, inclusive and structured environment where ideas and viewpoints can be discussed.

Discussion of controversial topics in the classroom is at the discretion of the teacher. Issues with no factual basis for controversy are not treated as controversial for purposes of this policy.

The Board wishes to ensure that controversial issues are presented in a manner that preserves the academic integrity of the district, are of significant interest to the community, have political, economic, cultural, or social significance, encourages students to come to their own opinions while respecting the opinions of others, and promotes inclusivity and dignity for all students.

The Board establishes the following guidelines for teachers to follow when presenting controversial issues in the classroom:

1. In the classroom, matters of a controversial nature are permitted.
2. When presenting various positions on a controversial issue, in order for classroom discussion to be rigorous, teachers will take care to:
 - balance major views;
 - assure that as many sides of the issues as possible are presented in a fair manner; and
 - not support one position as the only one acceptable.

3. Grading is based on objective criteria, without bias toward students' positions on the subject matter.
4. Discussion of controversial issues is conducted in a manner that takes into account students' age and development level.
5. Teachers will present adequate background information so that students can have informed discussions and be able to discuss the issue intelligently.
6. Teachers will review and ensure that their use of sources of supporting information dealing with controversial topics outside the scope of the prescribed curriculum:
 - have educational value and are relevant to the curriculum;
 - are appropriate to the developmental level of the students;
 - do not adversely affect the attainment of the district's instructional goals; and

The Board supports its staff in gaining the skills to be fully capable of discussing and presenting controversial topics, which includes successfully guiding students through the process, and managing contentious or heated exchanges. The district will provide for professional development and mentoring for teaching and administrative staff in this area, and encourages staff to participate in these activities.

Ref:

Appeal of Malverne Union Free School District, 29 EDR 363 (1990) (teachers' First Amendment rights in an educational setting)
Appeal of O'Connor, 29 EDR 48 (1989) (notification prior to dissemination of controversial materials)

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