

Title: Teaching about Controversial Issues

On both a planned and unplanned basis, the education process sometimes encounters topics that are considered controversial, such as when a topic:

1. Can reasonably be expected to make individuals in a class or other group feel uncomfortable, distressed, or even threatened;
2. Tends to elicit strong emotional reactions;
3. Challenges a person's assumptions or personal beliefs;
4. Creates or reveals real or perceived division based on differing beliefs, values, life experiences, or points of view;
5. Presents a problem over which there is significant, and often even emotional, disagreement regarding the appropriate solution; and/or
6. May cause some parents and guardians to question the school's role in addressing the topic with their child, and the potential for eliciting such a reaction is reasonably foreseeable.

Controversial topics and issues, as addressed by this policy, generally touch on matters of significant social, moral, and/or ethical consequence and can include sensitive matters dealing with race, sexuality, religion, politics, social violence, or a recent tragedy, but controversial topics can also be encountered in areas such as science, history, literature, and art.

The appropriate and acceptable approaches to the presentation, discussion, and analysis of potentially controversial topics by educators within a class or other school activity will vary depending on factors such as the specific topic, the context in which the topic arises (who, how, when, etc.), and the age of the students involved in the instruction or discussion. While the exploration of controversial topics can serve a number of valid and important educational objectives, in some situations the appropriate decision will be for a teacher or other educator to not engage students on the topic or issue.

When considering how to approach controversial topics and issues, District employees are expected to exercise sound professional judgment in a manner that is consistent with the specific context and with the following general guidelines and any additional administrative guidelines that may be implemented:

1. When a controversial topic is an inherent part of a prescribed curriculum, (e.g. human growth and development), the employees who are responsible for implementing the curriculum are expected to teach about the topic in a manner that adheres to and that is consistent with the prescribed curriculum.
2. When either the approved curriculum or a supervising administrator directs an employee to avoid teaching or addressing a controversial topic/issue with students in a particular context, the employee is expected to adhere to such directives. The employee should address any concerns about such a directive to a supervising administrator.
3. Staff are generally expected to avoid the pursuit of controversial topics that have no substantial connection to the curriculum the teacher is charged with delivering. For example, in a math class, a math teacher should not direct a learning activity about religion and religious controversies. An exception to this general rule may apply when, for example, a school administrator or leadership team directs or approves the examination of an issue of immediate concern that students are having. A school-to-parent communication is normally appropriate when such an exceptional situation arises unexpectedly.
4. District employees may not use their position to attempt to indoctrinate or convince students to adopt the employee's personal beliefs or personal world view with respect to controversial subjects/issues. District employees also shall not demonstrate any improper favoritism toward students who may share or who express support for beliefs, positions, or opinions on controversial issues that are consistent with those held by the employee.
5. Although it will often be appropriate for educators to avoid revealing their personal opinions, positions, or beliefs to students on a controversial topic or issue, if an educator determines that circumstances exist that justify making such a disclosure, the educator is expected to do so in a manner that does not denigrate the legitimacy of other positions/responses.
6. Within a class or other school-sponsored activity that explores a controversial issue, the District's expectation is that the educator who is responsible for the class or activity will serve as a facilitator who does not exhibit bias and who strives to conduct the learning activity and direct the related discussion in a manner that is respectful, non-threatening, productive (e.g., focusing on inquiry, analysis, and synthesis of information), and developmentally appropriate.
7. Teachers and other staff members are expected to proceed with particular caution with younger students, as such students generally are less able to understand and process the complexities that underlie many controversial issues and can be more susceptible to being unduly influenced and/or believing they are expected to adopt a particular position or belief, even when that is not the intent.

8. Prior to introducing a lesson, unit, or activity that will involve a controversial topic or issue, educators are expected to determine whether any applicable law or District policy or procedure requires staff to take steps such as obtaining advance administrative approval, providing advance parent and guardian notice, obtaining parental consent, or providing an opportunity for a parent or guardian (or adult student) to opt-out of participation. For example, federal law and related District policies require, at a minimum, parent notice and an opt-out opportunity prior to the administration of certain “protected information” surveys to students (i.e., surveys that address certain controversial or otherwise-sensitive topics).
9. Even when there is no law or District policy or procedure that expressly requires such steps, when an educator plans or is required to introduce or cover controversial issues with students, the educator should consider the extent to which it may be appropriate to (a) communicate with parents and guardians about the topic and the activities that will be taking place (whether in advance and/or after the fact), and/or (b) offer and respond to individual requests for alternative materials, lessons, or other accommodations. In making such determinations, educators are encouraged to discuss the matter with a supervising administrator and to evaluate any previous experiences with similar circumstances.
10. Educators are expected to follow established District procedures that apply to the selection and approval of guest speakers and to supplemental media or other similar supplemental content that they specifically assign or present to students. Appropriate advance review and screening of such materials will help to identify and evaluate potentially controversial content.
11. Instructional activities and discussions within a class or other school activity that address controversial issues will be most appropriate when there is a clear curricular connection, a defined and developmentally-appropriate educational purpose/goal, an intentional structure for the activity, and appropriate communication about the activity.
12. Educators who are unsure whether or how to approach a controversial issue in a class or other school activity are expected to communicate such concerns to a supervising administrator who has curricular responsibilities.
13. Educators are expected to notify a supervising administrator if a parent or guardian complains that the teacher or other representative of the school improperly handled a controversial issue or topic.

The guidelines and expectations listed above do not prevent District employees from addressing and requiring students to identify a District-prescribed curricular position, even if some individuals would assert that the curricular position is controversial or incorrect.

Parents and guardians should be aware that, consistent with this policy, the Board’s position is that it is not necessary for District educators to attempt to avoid addressing all controversial issues and

topics with students. Further, it is not practical for District educators to provide advance notice of every topic or issue that will be covered or discussed in a class or other school activity.

When a student has encountered, or when it is known that a student will soon encounter, a controversial issue or topic in a school setting, parents and guardians are encouraged to contact District staff to identify concerns or provide feedback and to directly discuss the issue or topic with their child in the context of the family's values and beliefs.

LEG REF: Wisconsin Statutes Sections 118.13, 118.01(2)(d)2c, 118.019

Wisconsin Administrative Code PI 9

Federal Laws 20 U.S.C. §1232(h)

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