

Controversial Issues and Guest Speakers

Controversial Issues Defined

An issue is controversial when there are substantial differences of opinion about it on the local, national, or international level and when these differences of opinion are accompanied by intense feelings and strong emotions on the part of individuals or groups.

Within the instructional setting, almost any topic may be considered controversial by any given individual. Controversial issues are not to be construed as those topics, which only incidentally and indirectly touch the personal biases, beliefs, or values of individuals. Nor are they particularly associated with personality conflicts, disciplinary problems, or professional grievances. Finally, teaching about controversial issues within the scope of this policy presumes a planned inquiry into such issues and not impromptu or incidental classroom discussion.

Responsibilities

Teaching about controversial issues, all of which are likely to contain a significant emotional element, requires the recognition and acceptance of responsibility by all persons concerned, including students, teachers, administrators, and patrons of the district.

- A. Students. Student responsibilities begin with a willingness to objectively examine one's own point of view and make a concerted effort to understand the reasons for differing points of view. Such willingness is basic to working effectively with others on issues of common concern but with divergent possible solutions. Responsibilities relating to this basic premise are further emphasized in the recognition that honest people may differ without malice, without the disruption of emotional outbursts, and without impugning the character or integrity of those who have differing opinions.
- B. Teachers. The effectiveness of the educational program in achieving the objective in this policy is depends primarily on the classroom teacher. As a result, the specific responsibilities of the teacher are:
 1. To determine the appropriateness of the issue with respect to the curriculum, course objectives, and the knowledge, maturity, and ability of the students.
 2. To advise the principal regarding the planned study of a controversial issue and to consult with the principal concerning the appropriateness of the proposal.
 3. To make provision for suitable instructional materials and adequate time to give reasonably thorough coverage of the topic and, otherwise, present the issues after adequate planning and preparation.
 4. To provide alternate projects for those students whose involvement would constitute a serious burden of conscience.
 5. To be sensitive to feelings in the community and judicious in treatment of the controversial issue.
 6. To maintain an active concern for the rights and feelings of individuals, including the right to privacy.
 7. To demonstrate, by teaching style and instructional demeanor, a commitment to the methods of objective inquiry in group activities.

8. To project, in the most positive way, his/her personal and professional adherence to practices which reflect respect for the dignity of the individual.
9. To ensure a balanced presentation through the careful selection of materials, guest speakers, and other instructional resources.
10. To label his/her opinion as such when it is expressed as a personal point of view.
11. To assist students in detecting propaganda devices and techniques and bias in presentations.
12. Not to expect or require that the class reach an agreement.
13. To help students deal with the feelings and emotions surrounding a controversial issue even though the class may not pursue the topic itself in great depth.

C. Administration. The building principal has the following responsibilities:

1. To consult with the teachers concerning the appropriateness of proposed content and methods of teaching about controversial issues.
2. To maintain a general atmosphere conducive to dealing with controversial issues.
3. To monitor teacher compliance with the responsibilities listed above.
4. To support and protect teachers from undue and unjustified criticism that might arise from dealing with controversial issues in the classroom.
5. To ensure that the instructional program is not exploited by special interest groups or pressure tactics. (This does not preclude the utilization of guest speakers to present different points of view.)

D. Patrons. Patrons of the district are responsible:

1. To recognize that it is the responsibility of the school to present controversial issues appropriate to the curriculum.
2. To refrain from attempting to suppress teaching about controversial issues, assuming that the guidelines of responsibility and appropriateness have been followed.
3. To inform the teacher, principal, and other appropriate personnel when they have information that indicates controversial issues are being dealt with in an inappropriate manner.

Guest Speakers

Since exposure to varying points of view is inherent to the educational process, students should have the opportunity to hear outside speakers who can serve as resource persons in regard to topics or issues relevant to the educational program.

The following procedures will be followed regarding the selection of outside speakers:

- A. In general, outside speakers will be permitted in the school at the request of a staff member. Requests by persons to speak to groups of students will be referred to the superintendent. The school district assumes no obligation to provide an audience for outside speakers.
- B. Prior to extending an invitation to an outside speaker, the faculty member will inform the

principal of the subject to be discussed and the names of all proposed guest speakers and will obtain the principal's permission for these speakers to appear before student groups. If the principal denies permission, he/she will give his/her reason for doing so.

- C. In the event that controversial issues or topics are to be presented, steps must be taken to ensure that:
1. The presentation relates directly to some aspect of the educational program.
 2. Provision has been made for a balanced presentation that includes all sides of a given issue.