

STUDY AND DISCUSSION OF CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this policy is to provide guidance to educators engaged in the study of controversial topics and to promote civil discourse.

The District's goal is to create an educational environment to support teachers and students when they enter into discussions of controversial topics in a manner that helps them evaluate multiple perspectives and to encourage civil and constructive critical thinking skills.

It is vital to provide students with the skills needed to participate in community and political life, cope with social change, appreciate other cultures, and gain an understanding of individual responsibility and ethics.

IDENTIFYING CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS

On both a planned and unplanned basis, a topic can be considered controversial when it:

1. Can be reasonably expected to make individuals in a class or other group feel uncomfortable, distressed, or 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. Causes some parents/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.
7. Provides an opportunity for various cultures, beliefs, traditions, and historical matters to be discussed.

GUIDELINES FOR DISCUSSION OF CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS

Teachers and students will engage in civil discourse when handling controversial topics in the classroom. The following guidelines are designed to protect teachers as well as students from unfair or inconsiderate criticism during the study of controversial topics.

1. Discussion should include the open expression of ideas, as long as those views are not derogatory, malicious, abusive, or discriminatory towards other's views.
2. Educators are expected to facilitate the exploration of the topic by presenting related issues objectively, impartially, and professionally.
3. The study of controversial issues should develop students' abilities to evaluate sources of information, undertake critical inquiry, and consider differing experiences and viewpoints.

4. Schools are to be neutral grounds for rational discourse and objective study. Schools are places for students to prepare for informed and reasoned involvement in community life, including its politics, by calm and cooperative study of social issues.
5. Discussion of controversial issues is acceptable when it clearly serves an educational purpose, is age appropriate, consistent with curricular objectives, arises during the educational process, and is consistent with the district's mission statement and non-discrimination policy. Such discussion is not intended to advance the interest of any group, political or otherwise.
6. All students have a right to competent instruction in an atmosphere free from bias, prejudice and harassment.
7. Educators and presenters should have the appropriate background and preparation to academically address such issues and should do so in accordance with the best practices and accepted norms of the discipline. Generally, controversial topics should have a substantial connection to the curriculum. A staff member to administrator communication is appropriate when such exceptional situations arise unexpectedly.
8. Although it will often be appropriate for educators to avoid revealing their personal opinions, positions, or beliefs to students on a controversial topic, 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 responses/positions. Specifically, educators will not attempt to persuade students into adoption of such personal opinions and/or beliefs.
9. Educators who are unsure whether, or how, to approach a controversial topic in class or other school activity are expected to communicate such concerns to a supervising administrator or the Director of Instruction and Learning.
10. It is not practical for educators to provide advance notice on every topic or issue that will be covered or discussed in a class or other school activity. However, when the controversial topic is foreseeable, parents/guardians will be provided with advanced notice by the teacher and have the right to judge whether certain materials are acceptable for their child(ren). No parent, guardian, or organization may abridge the rights of other parents or children to have access to materials that are a part of the school's educational program.
11. Students, parents and/or guardians are encouraged to contact the educator and/or administrator regarding the discussion of controversial topics in the classroom to identify concerns and provide feedback.
12. Controversial issues related to the program may be initiated by the students themselves provided they are presented in the ordinary course of classroom instruction, relate to the topic of instruction, and do not cause substantial disruption to the school environment. Controversial issues may not be initiated by a source outside the schools. Issues pertaining to human growth and development, as defined by statute, are subject to 118.019, Wis. Stats.
13. The Board of Education recognizes that a course of study or certain instructional materials may contain content and/or activities that some parents find objectionable. If after careful, personal review of the program lessons and/or materials, a parent indicates to the school that either content or activities conflicts with their religious beliefs or value system, the school will honor a written request for their child to be excused from particular classes for specified reasons. The student, however, will not be excused from participating in the course or activities mandated by the State and will be provided alternative learning activities during times of parent requested absences.

14. 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 the Director of Instruction and Learning.

It is the responsibility of the Principal to ensure that staff are familiar with the substance of this policy and, where appropriate, parents are consulted with regard to the participation of their children in programs dealing with controversial issues.

Legal Ref: 118.01(2)(d)2c, 118.019; 118.13 WSS; PI 9 WAC; 20 U.S.C. §1232(h)

Cross Ref: 381 Rule Guidelines for Teaching About Controversial Issues; 411.2

Accommodation of Student's Religious Beliefs

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05/08/06

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