Teaching Controversial Issues in the Schools

1. Effective teaching, in the present day of world-wide mass communication through press, radio, television, and internet must be concerned with issues with which pupils will have at least intellectual contact, with or without adult guidance. Good teaching regarding such issues requires that teachers be well informed in both content of the issues and the processes of critical thinking; in obtaining this preparation the school system and the individual teacher share responsibility.

2. A “controversial issue” or a “controversial topic” is defined as a point or matter about which there exist significant opposing viewpoints and/or multiple perspectives. Controversial issues or topics may or may not be clearly defined so the utmost care should be taken by teachers to ensure appropriate instructional delivery and support is provided to students should a controversial issue arise. Controversial issues could include issues related to minority populations, protected groups, protected speech, historical decisions, actions of groups or individuals, including religious beliefs, or beliefs of groups of individuals.

3. Teachers may include controversial issues or topics as part of their curriculum when the following conditions are met:
   
   a. The issue or topic is presented in an atmosphere free from bias and prejudice.
   
   b. The treatment of the issue in question must be within range, knowledge, maturity, and competence of the students as judged by the classroom teacher, with concurrence of the principal if any doubts exist.
   
   c. Students are provided access to relevant and credible information pertaining to the issue under study.
   
   d. There should be study materials and other learning aids available from which a reasonable amount of data pertaining to all aspects of the issue should be obtained.
   
   e. The consideration of the issue should require only as much time as is needed for satisfactory study by the class; but sufficient time should be provided not only to cover the data pertaining to the issue but also to engage in critical analysis of the data, with particular awareness of common opinion controlling devices.
f. The issue has political, economic, or social significance and is presented within appropriate curricular guidelines.

g. In discussing controversial issues, the teacher should keep in mind that the classroom is a forum and not a committee for producing resolutions or dogmatic pronouncements. The class should feel no responsibility for reaching an agreement.

h. When discussing controversial issues, the teacher should provide appropriate pre-teaching and post-teaching to prepare students in advance and properly debrief. Controversial materials should be limited to the classroom and class period where the topic is taught and/or discussed. Students not properly engaged in the learning process of a controversial topic should not be exposed to the topic material without adequate instruction.

4. A teacher who uses a controversial topic or issue in his or her curriculum is responsible for ensuring that:

   a. Information from all views on a controversial issue is presented in an appropriate manner; and

   b. The teacher’s personal views are only shared when appropriate and that they are presented as opinion rather than fact.

A teacher who uses a controversial topic, or issue in his or her curriculum must refrain from advocating partisan causes, sectarian religious views, or selfish propaganda.

5. A teacher who is in doubt concerning the advisability of discussing certain issues in the classroom should confer with the principal as to the appropriateness of doing so. If the principal and the teacher are unable to agree, the issue should be referred to the Superintendent. In any event, the teacher has the responsibility of informing the Principal when dealing with a controversial topic.

6. Principals are responsible for approving controversial issues to be considered in the classroom to ensure that any speech restrictions are narrowly tailored and are limited to content-neutral factors. If the principal and the teacher are unable to agree, the issues should be referred to the Director of Curriculum and Instruction. If not resolved, the issue will be referred to the Superintendent.

7. To encourage maximum freedom of thinking and the testing of points of view in the critical thinking process, no taping or other mechanical recording of the classroom discussion will be permitted except with the specific approval of the teacher with knowledge of the classroom, and except for its use in carrying out the total instructional plan.

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