

ADOPTED: February 4, 1993
REVIEWED: November 21, 2002

TEACHING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

American academic tradition stresses the free contest of ideas as a vital element both in the development of curriculum and in classroom teaching.

Teaching Controversial Issues

Training in reflective and responsive thinking, though incorporated in course offerings at all grade levels, is the special responsibility of the social studies. This training is impossible, or at least severely hampered, if the community does not respect the principles of freedom and recognize that dissent does not necessarily mean disloyalty. However, one form of dissent which is absolutely incompatible with freedom is that which attempts to end freedom. Irrational fears do just this, and thereby may block the school in its efforts to handle controversial issues in an atmosphere of freedom and thoroughness.

- A. It is the responsibility of the schools to make provision for the study of controversial issues.
 - 1. The policy on controversial issues should be defined in terms of the rights of pupils rather than in terms of the rights of teachers.
 - 2. The level of maturity of students shall be considered when planning instruction on controversial issues.
 - 3. The study should be objective and scholarly with a minimum emphasis on opinion and a maximum emphasis on facts.

- B. In the study of controversial issues the pupil has the following rights:
 - 1. The right to study any controversial issue which has political, economic, or social significance and concerning which (at the appropriate level) s/he should begin to have an opinion;

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2. The right to have free access to all relevant information;
 3. The right to form and express opinions on controversial issues without thereby jeopardizing relations with the teacher or the school; and
 4. The right to study under competent instruction in an atmosphere free from bias and prejudice.
- C. The teacher employs the same method in handling areas of controversy as characterize the best teaching at any time.
1. The teacher, in selecting both the content and the method of instruction, is mindful of the maturity level of the students.
 2. The teacher has assured himself/herself that the controversial subject to be discussed belongs within the framework of the curriculum to be covered, that the subject is significant as well as meaningful for the pupils, and that through the discussion, pupils will have some opportunity to grow.
 3. The teacher handles the classroom presentation in ways which will insure a wide range of information and interpretation for the pupils' consideration and strives to present a balance among many points of view.
 4. The teacher does not use the classroom as a personal forum. S/he does not employ the techniques of the demagogue or the propagandist for attention, for control, or simply for color. The teacher has the right to identify and express his/her own point of view in the classroom as long as s/he indicates clearly that it is his/her own.
 5. The teacher emphasizes keeping an open mind, basing one's judgment on known facts, looking closely at facts to evaluate them in terms of the subject under discussion, and being ready to change one's opinion should new facts come to light.
 6. The emphasis is always on the methods of forming an opinion as much as on the opinion formed.

