

Teaching About Controversial Issues

American academic tradition stresses the free exchange of ideas as a basic element of curriculum development, instruction, and discussion. Studying controversial issues in school is important in preparing students to participate intelligently and responsibly in a democratic and pluralistic society.

The RSU 40 Board of Education supports the study and discussion of controversial issues within the context of approved curricula and in an atmosphere of mutual respect. For the purpose of this policy controversial issues are topics that may be publicly sensitive and about which there are varied levels of opposing views, biases, emotions and/or conflict, including, but not limited to, human sexuality, religion, and political, moral, or ethical beliefs.

To promote the fair, appropriate, and unbiased consideration of controversial issues in the instructional setting, the following principals are established:

1. Discussion of a controversial issue will be appropriate to the emotional, social, intellectual, and physical age of students and conducted in an atmosphere of respect and acknowledgement of differing viewpoints.
2. If a controversial issue is to be discussed, it must be within the context of the approved curricula. The educator must be knowledgeable with the issue, and serve as a facilitator to insure that all points of view are presented in a professional manner.
3. In the capacity of facilitator, it is the educator's responsibility to identify various points of view on an issue, and to make certain that no one point of view or opinion becomes the only or preferred attitude or persuasion.

4. When religion is the issue, discussion is encouraged and is permitted to explore cultural, ethical, and moral issues.
 - a. No educator is allowed to promote or give the appearance of promoting a particular religion.
 - b. The educator must be aware of the impact that stating his/her beliefs, religions preferences, or practices might have on a student and not state those beliefs, preference, or practices.
 - c. The educator must also be aware of and prevent any attempt by a student to proselytize. Debates about which religious beliefs are true or correct should be discouraged.

5. When human sexuality is the issue, discussion will be limited to Family Life Education Topics.
 - a. These topics may include family structure, roles, and responsibilities; gender roles; sexual stereotypes; marriage; divorce; contraception, abstinence, and family planning; STDs; reproductive process; prenatal care; heredity; parenting; physical and sexual abuse; “latch key kids;” baby sitting skills and responsibilities.
 1. No educator is allowed to promote or give the appearance of promoting a particular life style.
 2. The educator must also be aware of and prevent any attempt by a student to advocate a particular life style.

6. Students will have access to all relevant information and materials located in the school libraries and computers as guided by the Student Computer and Internet Use Policy (IJNDB).

To encourage thoughtful, accurate, and open discussion of controversial issues, in the appropriate instructional setting, the following principles are established:

1. All discussion of a controversial issue will be conducted in an atmosphere of respect and acknowledgement of differing viewpoints. Educators must be fully aware of their responsibility to have varying viewpoints presented.

2. The handling of a controversial issue in classes will be free from the assumption that there is only one correct opinion. Ideas should emerge from discussion and not from authoritative instruction. The purpose is to have students understand, as fully as possible, all sides of the question and begin to develop their own techniques for the consideration of controversial issues.
3. A controversial issue is to be discussed by an educator prepared for the responsibility. The educator will be knowledgeable and comfortable with the issue to be discussed in order to allow for thoughtful, accurate, and open discussion.

If the teacher feels a need for additional support in a certain area of the curriculum, the administration will be notified.

If a concern that compromises family confidentiality should arise, that issue will be discussed in an environment where confidentiality is not compromised such as in a private discussion between the student and teacher at an appropriate time. In many situations, students may need to be referred to guidance or social work staff.

Cross Reference: IJNDB Student Computer and Internet Use