

Controversial Issues in the Curriculum

Policy

A controversial issue involves a problem about which different individuals and groups urge conflicting courses of action. It is an issue for which society has not reached consensus, and it is of sufficient significance that each proposed way of dealing with it is objectionable to some sector of the citizenry. The objection may result from a feeling that a cherished belief, an economic interest, or a basic principle is threatened. A controversial issue is one that has a meaningful historical, political, economic, scientific or social basis. Because the development of rational thinking and preparation for citizenship are among the educational goals of the school system, the Torrington Public Schools have a responsibility to include, in various curriculum areas at all grade levels, content dealing with current critical issues, some of which will be controversial.

The Torrington Public Schools as an educational institution and the individual classroom teacher have a responsibility to give the student:

1. An opportunity to study controversial issues which have historical, political, economic, scientific or social significance about which students will begin to have an opinion.
2. Access to all relevant information, including the materials that circulate freely in the community.
3. Competent instruction balancing the various points of view in an atmosphere free from bias and prejudice.
4. The right to form and express his/her own opinions on controversial issues without jeopardizing his/her relations with teachers or the schools.

In fulfilling this responsibility the teacher shall make a deliberate effort to achieve balance within a reasonable period of time in the viewpoints and information to which students are exposed. In selecting certain controversial issues to be included in the instructional program the staff shall use the following guidelines:

1. The issue should contribute toward helping students develop techniques for examining other controversial issues.
2. The issue should be suitable for students of the maturity and background represented in the class.
3. The issue should be related to the course content and help achieve course objectives.
4. The issue should be of continuing significance.

In instances where a controversial issue arises on an unanticipated basis during the course of a class discussion, as the result of a student's question, or in the coverage of current events, and where that issue is neither directly related to the course content nor specified as a part of the

curriculum, the teacher may deal with the issue on a limited basis, recognizing the existence of legitimate student interest and devoting sufficient time to the question to assure balanced, impartial coverage.

A student may be exempted from class activities involving the controversial issue in question upon receipt of a written request for exemption from his/her parent or guardian. The teacher will then assign the student alternate activities of equal merit. Although individuals may be excused from the activity, the continuation of the activity by class, school or district shall not be restricted until final disposition has been made in accordance with this policy.

Administrative Regulations

Principals and content leaders (coordinators, supervisors, and instructional area leaders) shall be responsible for informing all staff members of the policy on controversial issues. In doing so, they shall emphasize that the school is providing an opportunity for students to study controversial issues, not promoting a point-of-view.

Integrating Controversial Issues into Subjects

A teacher who is interested in including the study of a controversial issue shall consult with the department's content leader/administrator and the building principal regarding the appropriateness of doing so. The decision will be binding for all teachers teaching that subject/course.

After the decision to include the issue has been made, the teacher should notify parents of his/her students of the purpose for studying the issue(s) and list the materials that will be used in class. This notification is most must be done at the beginning of the course or the unit of study. The notification should provide for parents/guardians with the opportunity to ask questions and include the opportunity for the student to opt out of instruction on the issue.

It is important to note, that serendipitous discussion on a controversial issue may occur during instruction. Teachers are directed to use their professional judgment and sensitivity to students in determining the content and length of the discussion.

Resolving Complaints Related to Controversial Issues

The purpose of this process is resolve complaints at the lowest level.

When a complaint is received from a parent/guardian of a student in the class that is studying a controversial issue, the parent should be directed to speak with the teacher who will explain the "opt out" provision.

If the parent/guardian is not satisfied, s/he shall meet with the building principal and content leader to discuss the issue. The parent/guardian's concerns shall be noted for consideration when the department reviews the subject/course in the spring.

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