

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. The Cape Elizabeth School Department believes that exploring controversial issues is an important part of the educational experience.

Training in reflective and responsive thinking may be incorporated in course offerings at all grade levels. 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 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 provisions for the study of controversial issues.

1. The policy on controversial issues should be defined in terms of the rights of students rather than in terms of the rights of teachers.
2. Discussion of controversial issues shall be appropriate to the age, grade, and maturity of the students involved.
3. The study should be objective and scholarly with a minimum emphasis on opinion and a maximum emphasis on facts and critical thinking.

B. In the study of controversial issues, students have the following rights:

1. The right to study controversial issues which have political, economic, or social significance and concerning which (at the appropriate level) they should begin to have an opinion;
2. The right to have access to 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. Teachers employ the same methods in handling controversial issues as characterize the best teaching at any time.

1. Teachers, in selecting both the content and the method of instruction, are mindful of the maturity level of the students.

2. Teachers have assured themselves 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 students, and that through the discussion, students will have the opportunity to grow.
3. Teachers handle the classroom presentation in ways that will ensure a wide range of information and interpretation for students' consideration and strive to present a balance among many points of view.
4. Teachers do not use the classroom as a personal forum. Teachers do not employ the techniques of the demagogue or the propagandist for attention, for control, or simply for color. Teachers have the right to identify and express their own point of view in the classroom as long as they indicate clearly that it is their own.
5. Teachers emphasize keeping an open mind, basing judgment on known facts, looking closely at facts to evaluate them in terms of the subject under discussion, and being ready to change an opinion should new facts come into light.
6. The emphasis always is on the method of forming an opinion as much as on the opinion formed.

Cross Reference: IMBB – Accommodation of Sincere Beliefs in Required Instruction

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