

BOARD OF EDUCATION

Cherry Hill, New Jersey

POLICY 6144

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

Free discussion of controversial issues -- political, economic, social -- shall be encouraged in the classroom whenever appropriate for the level of the group.

Pupils must be guaranteed the right to:

- A. Study any controversial issue which has political, economic, or social significance and concerning which (at his/her level) he/she should begin to have an opinion;
- B. Have free access to all relevant information, including the material that circulates freely in the community;
- C. Study under competent instruction in an atmosphere free from bias and prejudice;
- D. Form and express his/her own opinion on controversial subjects without thereby jeopardizing his/her relations with the teachers or school.

Issues may be considered controversial which arouse strong reactions, based either on personal conviction or allegiance to a group. School treatment of controversial issues shall be designed to instruct pupils in fair and objective study techniques. The decision on whether a particular controversial issue shall become a matter for school study shall be based on the timeliness of the question, the maturity and needs of the pupils and the purposes of the schools.

The presentation and discussion of controversial issues in the classroom must be on an informative basis. Teachers must guard against giving their personal opinions on sectarian or political questions or any other controversial issues until the pupils have had the opportunity to:

- A. Find, collect, and assemble factual materials on the subject;
- B. Interpret the data without prejudice;
- C. Reconsider assumptions and claims;
- D. Reach their own conclusions.

Personal opinions should be clearly identified as such when presented to students.

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By refraining from expressing personal views before and during the period of research and study, the teacher encourages the pupils to search after truth and to think for themselves. The development of an ability to meet issues without prejudice and to withhold judgments while facts are being collected, assembled, and weighed, and relationships seen before drawing inferences or conclusions is among the most valuable outcomes of a free educational system.

Classroom discussions on controversial questions which arise unexpectedly shall be the responsibility of the teacher, who shall provide relevant information on both sides of the question. Such discussions shall be kept free from the assumption that there is one correct answer which should emerge from a discussion and be taught authoritatively to the pupils.

In summary, any discussion of controversial issues in the classroom shall be conducted in an unprejudiced and dispassionate manner designed to foster a spirit of inquiry. Such discussion shall not:

- A. Disrupt the educational process;
- B. Fail to match the maturity level of the pupils;
- C. Be unrelated to the goals of the board and the appropriate curriculum guide;
- D. Present any one opinion as definitive.

If teachers wish to supplement the course guide with material that may be of a controversial nature, i.e., subject to interpretation as obscene, profane, doctrinaire or inappropriate, each in relation to the maturity level of the class, they should first review the material with the principal. In doubtful cases, the chief school administrator may present the matter for board consideration.

Pupils shall be taught to recognize and be assured of each other's right to form an opinion on controversial issues, as well as their own.

The building principal shall have the authority to limit or suspend discussion of controversial issues pending a review of the issue/materials. Instructional materials not previously approved must be reviewed by the principal before being introduced into the classroom.

In cases where the principal may be unsure, he/she shall bring the matter to the chief school administrator who may present it for board consideration.

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In determining speakers to be invited for a class or schoolwide program, the principal must provide approval and consider whether:

- A. The speaker is controversial for any reason:
- B. The topic is controversial, or sensitive, or known to arouse strong community feelings;
- C. The proposed speaker would gain a personal or financial advantage by speaking to a school audience.

Legal References:

N.J.S.A. 18A:11-1
N.J.S.A. 18A:54-20

General mandatory powers and duties.
Powers of board...

Adopted: 02/26/96