

# TEACHING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

An essential component of a strong educational program is the open exchange of ideas. While curriculum and materials for the schools are determined by the Board of Education, there are likely to be times when issues of a controversial nature arise in the classroom. This policy is designed to guide school staff in the handling of controversial issues in classroom teaching methodologies and discussions.

For purposes of this policy, a controversial issue is a topic on which opposing points of view have been raised in general public opinion or by experts and may arouse both support and opposition. These issues may range across a wide spectrum of political, social, economic, and religious topics. These issues could arise spontaneously in classroom discussion or be a part of a planned classroom lesson. Addressing controversial issues may involve teacher presentations, student discussions and structured debate, outside resource speakers or multi-media presentations. All controversial issues addressed in the school setting should:

- relate to the mission, vision, and goals of the district;
- be an extension or enrichment of the curriculum of a program/course of study;
- be age appropriate in terms of student maturity level; and
- lead to students learning about how to use critical thinking and problem solving skills to study and analyze relevant issues, evaluate different sources of information, make intelligent decisions regarding issues and how to appreciate the value of differing viewpoints.

Teachers have a responsibility to show objectivity in order that various sides of a controversial issue are presented. Consequently, the teacher has an obligation to be well informed in the area(s) to be presented and/or discussed. Teachers should differentiate between fact and theory. While it is recognized that a teacher has a right to maintain a particular point of view and to express that view, the teacher has an obligation to inform students that the position is a personal one. The teacher also has an obligation to allow students to present alternative views of the issue.

Teachers are expected to use professional judgment in selecting and determining the appropriateness of specific controversial issues, speakers, or multi-media presentations. The teacher should help students identify relevant information, learn the techniques of critical analysis, to make independent judgments and how to prepare to present and support their thought and opinions. The teacher should also help students become sensitive to the continuing need to objectively examine issues in light of new information and changing conditions in society.

In no situation should a student be required to be involved in a discussion or presentation relative to beliefs, issues, or ideas that are contrary to the moral convictions/religious beliefs of the student and/or his/her parent(s) or guardian(s). Prior to addressing controversial issues in the classroom, other than those that happen spontaneously, teachers should consult with and gain approval of their principal. If in discussion the teacher and/or principal perceive possible student or parent concerns, written communication should take place with parent(s)/guardian(s) before the presentation/discussion occurs. Participation objections are to be expressed in writing and provided to the teacher and building principal by the parent(s)/guardian(s). In classroom situations where controversial issues arise spontaneously and are discussed and the teacher believes such discussion may lead to later comments or questions from parent(s)/guardian(s), the teacher should inform the building principal of the discussion that occurred.

If for any reason there is disagreement between what the principal approves and what a teacher proposes, the teacher may have the matter reviewed by the Superintendent.

SCHOOL DISTRICT OF JEFFERSON  
BOARD OF EDUCATION POLICY

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CROSS REF.: Board Policy IIA, Selection of Instructional Materials  
Board Policy IGAHB, Human Growth and Development Instruction

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