

TEACHING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

Background

In approaching controversial issues, it must be recognized that the teacher acts in “*loco parentis*”, and that the individual and the family are the basic units of our society; therefore, the stand of parents on an issue must be considered. In this respect it is important that professional educators conduct themselves in keeping with a basic principle of education, “To enlighten rather than prejudice”. Healthy discussion and debate on controversial issues serves to identify competing perspectives, helps to build understanding and provide the foundational skills for democratic discourse.

Procedures

The Superintendent believes that with skilled teaching, controversial issues that are age and grade appropriate, and curriculum relevant, can be thoroughly aired without bias, to facilitate learning and foster greater understanding and respect.

1. Attention must be focused on fact, rather than on opinion and controversy. Facts mean all relevant information.
2. Presenting facts means all opinions on an issue will be considered by all students on the topic.
3. Participants will engage in orderly discussion and outcomes related to the development of reasoning, logic, public speaking and democratic process are to be encouraged by teachers. Some value may come from permitting students to air their opinion at first, and then reflect on what has been said after the presentation and discussion of facts.
4. Teachers may state their own opinion as such, when questioned by students or where relevant to the curriculum. In making such statements, however, the personal nature of the opinion must be stressed (e.g. “this is my personal belief...”) in order that the objectivity of the discussion may be retained and that the teacher’s opinion is one of many.
5. The teacher shall assure that discussion of a controversial issue is not needlessly prolonged and shall remain in the context of prescribed curriculum. The discussion of current events is part of the prescribed curriculum.
6. Those whose viewpoint is not yet formed shall be encouraged to “suspend judgments” until the important facts are discussed.
7. Appropriate resources representative of the various viewpoints should be readily available.
8. Participants in a discussion shall strive not to ridicule or embarrass another individual for his/her beliefs.
9. Teachers shall provide advance notice to a parent or guardian of a student where the planned courses of study, educational program or instructional materials, or instruction or exercises, include subject matter that deals primarily and explicitly with religion, human sexuality or sexual orientation.

Reference: Section 39, 60, School Act
Alberta Guide to Education 2010, pp. 16, 71-73
Alberta Human Rights Act, RSA 2000, Chapter A-25.5
Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom, Constitution Act, 1982