

GUIDELINES FOR ADDRESSING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES WITH STUDENTS IN CLASSES AND OTHER SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

R 381

Teachers and other educators may need to address situations in which a controversial issue comes up in an unplanned manner — such as when a controversial issue is unexpectedly raised by a student. In such situations, it is normally acceptable for an educator to:

1. Acknowledge the student(s) or the other source(s) that caused the controversial issue to come up (i.e., do not be dismissive).
2. Identify the unexpected and potentially-controversial issue for the affected students, noting that other students and other people may have different opinions, experiences, beliefs, or perspectives regarding the topic.
3. Decide whether the educator is sufficiently prepared and willing to further engage students in the topic in the moment, evaluating the specific context — such as the strength of the curricular connection, the interest and maturity of the students, and the degree to which the diversion may affect other planned activities:
 - a. If so, take a brief moment to organize an approach to the discussion, applying District guidelines to the extent practical in the spontaneous context. Determine whether the engagement with the topic will be brief, or more extensive.
 - b. If not, and particularly if students express a clear desire to pursue the topic, attempt to identify the reason(s) that the group will not engage in the topic at that time. Consider whether any alternative outlets for student interest in the topic can be identified or scheduled.

When planning to address a controversial issue through student discussion or through more in-depth study or exploration, the following general process guidelines may provide some assistance. However, the guidelines below will not apply equally well to all situations.

1. **Identify the purpose(s) of taking on the controversial issue.** The exploration of controversial topics can serve a number of valid and important educational objectives, such as:

- a. deepening students' awareness of the origin of and reasons for the controversy;
 - b. promoting critical thinking and other analytical skills, potentially including any of the following:
 - identifying, developing, and analyzing positions,
 - identifying current implications or potential future consequences of a conflict, policy, or behavior,
 - planning future actions to reach positive outcomes or avoid negative outcomes;
 - c. developing a better understanding of the pluralistic nature of society;
 - d. learning and using skills that promote mature discussion and debate; and
 - e. relating curricular concepts to concrete issues that students and others encounter as members of a community and members of a larger society.
2. **Determine whether it would be appropriate (or, in some cases, mandatory) to communicate with parents and guardians ahead of time.** Be prepared to address requests for alternative material or other accommodations in a consistent manner.
 3. **Provide a common foundation for the discussion or learning activity.** This might be done by helping students explore the origin of the controversy through research, or by assigning or presenting introductory/background material, etc.
 4. **Establish ground rules and expectations with/for students.** Examples of ground rules that may apply in some situations include the following:
 - a. Discussion and disagreement is to be respectful, including listening respectfully to comments or ideas that you disagree with, without interrupting or denigrating the speaker, holding side conversations, etc.
 - b. Personal attacks or comments that constitute harassment or intimidation will not be tolerated.
 - c. Avoid inflammatory and derogatory comments/language.

- d. Link claims, assertions, and opinions to appropriate evidence.
 - e. Information is shared for the purpose of learning, not to coerce or indoctrinate someone else.
 - f. Do not ask or expect individuals to speak on behalf of an entire social group; as you listen to others, keep in mind that individuals are generally speaking only for themselves.
 - g. At the end of the process, it is acceptable to remain uncertain and it may be necessary and appropriate to “agree to disagree” while avoiding labels of “right” and “wrong.”
5. **Plan and serve as a facilitator of the discussion or presentation of information in a reasonably structured manner.** Ultimately, the educator should aim to teach students *how* to think and communicate, not *what* to think. As a facilitator:
- a. Model, encourage, and recognize appropriate behaviors; intervene when ground rules or other expectations are broken.
 - b. Redirect discussion/comments that get off track or lose focus.
 - c. Provide opportunities for inclusion/participation, but be respectful of a student’s decision not to comment or share.
 - d. Help students understand the difference between (1) being able to identify, articulate, and understand opposing viewpoints or information, and (2) being required to adopt and hold a position or belief with which a person disagrees.
 - e. Help students understand that approaching a controversial topic with real or intellectually-adopted uncertainty and skepticism can be a useful way to process information and to either develop, confirm, or refute one’s independent opinion. It is also acceptable to remain uncertain.
 - f. Help students to distinguish between situations where a personal opinion or personal anecdote may be either more relevant or less relevant.
 - g. Use open-ended and probing questions to provide opportunities for students to elaborate on or clarify a point that they have made or to identify possible information gaps.

- h. Summarize discussion at appropriate points.
 - i. If discussion of a particular topic is one sided, ask students to articulate opposing viewpoints as a specific exercise and/or use other methods to bring greater balance to the discussion.
6. **After the activity, evaluate how it went.** Consider seeking feedback from students, parents and guardians, and others. Reflect on the discussion or learning activity to determine what worked well and whether any changes should be made going forward.

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