

Teaching about Controversial/Sensitive Issues

Controversial issues are defined as those problems, subjects or questions about which there are significant differences of opinion, for which there are no easy resolutions, and discussion of which generally create strong feelings among people. Although there may be disagreement over what the facts are and what they mean, subjects usually become controversial issues because of differences in the values people use in applying the facts.

Controversy is inherent in the democratic way of life. It is essential, therefore, that the study and discussion of controversial issues have an important place in education for citizenship in a free society. Students can develop into free citizens with informed loyalty to democracy only through the process of examining evidence, facts and differing viewpoints; through the exercise of freedom of thought and moral choice, and through the making of responsible decisions. These procedures are as characteristic of and essential to a free society as authoritarian indoctrination is to totalitarianism.

Each student has the right and need, under competent guidance and instruction, to study issues appropriate to his interest, experience, ability and age. He must have access to relevant information, and he has the obligation to examine carefully all sides of an issue. He has the right to form and express his own point of view and opinions without jeopardizing his position in the classroom or in the school.

Each teacher has the right and the obligation to teach about controversial issues. It is his responsibility to select issues for study and discussion which contribute to the attainment of course objectives and to make available to students materials concerning the various aspects of the issues. He also has the obligation to be as objective as possible and to present fairly the several sides of an issue. Although he has the right to express his own viewpoint and opinions, he does not have the right to indoctrinate students to his views. Controversial issues are to be presented with good judgment, keeping in mind the maturity and background of the students. The influence on values, attitudes and responsibility of the individual students must be considered in conjunction with the actual subject content.

Delta County School District 50J

CROSS REFS.: IB, Academic Freedom
IJ, Instructional Resources and Materials