

**ENFIELD BOARD OF EDUCATION
ENFIELD, CONNECTICUT**

Instruction

6144

Controversial Issues

Introduction

Open, constructive dialogue about issues of public concern is a hallmark of lifelong learning and responsible citizenship. This includes the discussion of controversial social, political, and economic topics and policies.

The Enfield Board of Education (Board) believes in the following principles, honoring teachers' academic freedom as well as students' individual identities:

1. The District shall create a safe, inclusive learning environment where students are able to participate freely in academic dialogue as speakers and listeners. The school environment shall be used to provide balanced information and ideas on issues of opinion so that students may formulate their own positions and opinions.
2. Schools and classrooms are an environment where students must feel physically and emotionally safe. The District aspires to create a climate in which students consistently feel a sense of belonging and membership. Therefore, the schools must be a place free from a discourse that is intentionally harmful toward others or expresses hatred, bigotry, bias, or otherwise is reasonably intentionally hurtful to others.

It is the duty of the educational community to model for our students the ideals of acceptance of diversity and respect for civil discourse. It is incumbent upon educators to establish an emotionally safe environment for students to explore new ideas. It is our role to teach varied ideologies and political perspectives; engage students in critical thinking; and facilitate students' discovery of their own ideals and thoughts, all while modeling respectful dialogue and authentic inquiry.

At times, due to the nature of public discourse, educators may be reluctant to engage in discussion of controversial topics in an effort to avoid the perception of bias or judgment. Teachers must be keenly aware of their position of influence and that the classroom is not a forum to promote a particular political vantage point. As partners in our students' education, we shall aspire to promote healthy, authentic dialogue in our classrooms and corridors.

Definition of a Controversial Issue

An idea, viewpoint or topic can be considered controversial if, "a number of people disagree about statements and assertions made in connection with the proposition. Issues that deeply divide a society, which generate conflicting explanations and solutions based on alternative value systems, are considered controversial." The scope of issues that might be considered controversial is quite broad. The content of these issues may vary from local problems to issues international in scale.

Controversial Issues (continued)**Engagement of Students in Learning About and Discussing Controversial Issues**

The inclusion of controversial topics in the curriculum helps to:

- Develop students' critical thinking skills;
- Improve interpersonal skills, and
- Prepare students for their roles as contributors to a pluralistic democracy.

The productive treatment of controversial subjects demands a classroom climate conducive to the free expression of ideas. This should include the opportunity to hear a wide range of views, student freedom to express ideas, and teacher willingness to discuss ideas. Additional considerations include the following:

A. Selection of Issues

Topics of classroom discussion should, first and foremost, always be driven by the District curriculum. In selecting discussion issues, teachers should also consider their students' interest, experience, and expertise regarding the issue; the relevance of issues to their students' lives; their students' maturity level; and the significance of the issue to society.

B. Preparation of Students for Discussion

Teachers should invest time to train their students in discussion techniques. Teachers and students cooperatively determine guidelines for interaction, and both realize establishing a rhythm and flow of discussions will take practice and patience.

Ensuring that students are adequately prepared to handle an issue in a discussion format requires that teachers provide informational resources and that students have an opportunity to acquire background knowledge prior to the discussion. Background information may be provided through readings, lectures, films, guest speakers, or field trips.

C. Establishment of an Open Discussion Climate

The creation of an intellectually safe environment for student participation is one of the most important elements of successful discussions. Teachers should model appropriate discussion behaviors by carefully listening to and respecting students' contributions. Teachers should tolerate widely divergent views and encourage the expression of them in order to establish a non-threatening arena for the exposition of ideas. Students must understand that they should not interrupt each other's comments and that they may disagree without being disagreeable.

D. Maintenance of Focus and Direction

District teachers should work to provide the necessary structure for constructive discussions. An agenda for the discussion might include defining the problem,

Controversial Issues**D. Maintenance of Focus and Direction** (continued)

summarizing and analyzing evidence, suggesting possible solutions, hypothesizing consequences of solutions and relating the issue to the personal experience of the students.

E. Intellectual Balance, Encouraging Equal Participation

A primary role of the teacher in facilitating the learning of curriculum and moderating classroom discussions is to ensure that students are exposed to the full range of perspectives on any issue considered. Teachers should actively solicit a wide array of opinions about discussed issues and expose students to a fair hearing of competing points of view. If important viewpoints on a given issue are not expressed, they may be elicited through careful questioning; or they may be provided by asking students to role-play someone who would present that perspective. To achieve a level of balanced participation it is often necessary to actively draw reticent students into the discussion and to limit the contributions of more outspoken students. The establishment of a participation system is generally helpful in addressing this problem.

F. Guiding Principles

Above all, the District objective is to allow students to figure out their views about, and stance on issues themselves. The Board believes effectively and responsibly addressing controversial issues in the educational process provides a unique opportunity to partner with families. To that end, the Board pledges its commitment to these guiding principles:

- We aim to create a safe, inclusive learning environment where students are able to participate freely in academic dialogue as speakers and listeners.
- Schools and classrooms are an environment where students feel physically and emotionally safe. We aspire to create a climate where students consistently feel a sense of belonging and membership.
- We respect the inquisitiveness of learners as well as the family and community belief systems which they bring to school.
- The US Constitution is the law of the land and a cornerstone of our curriculum. We aim to present relevant features of the US Constitution in timely and meaningful contexts. In the spirit of the Constitution, we underscore that all students, regardless of their opinion or conviction, warrant respect.
- We are open and available to help students with any confusion they may experience in the process of political debate, whether that be with educators or their peers. Students should feel free to seek out the support of a guidance counselor, teacher, or administrator if they feel the need to discuss any issue.

Controversial Issues**Requests from Groups or Individuals Outside the Schools**

No permission will be granted to non-school groups or individuals to make presentations on controversial issues in the schools during school hours. Requests for after-school or evening use will be processed in accordance with the Board's policy on community use of school facilities.

No permission will be granted to outsiders for distribution of literature on controversial issues to students in general or to class groups.

A Principal may grant an outside group or individual permission to post one notice of a public meeting for discussion of issues if the language of that notice conforms to the standards that prevail in the community. The Principal will determine the appropriate bulletin board for such notices.

- (cf. 0521.1 – Anti Racism)
- (cf. 0521.2 – Commitment to Religious Neutrality)
- (cf. 0523 – Equity and Diversity)
- (cf. 1312 – Public Complaints)
- (cf. 4118.21 – Academic Freedom)
- (cf. 5131.911 – Bullying/Safe School Climate)
- (cf. 5145.2 – Freedom of Speech/Expression)
- (cf. 6141 – Curriculum Design/Development/Revision)
- (cf. 6141.2 – Recognition of Religious Beliefs and Customs)
- (cf. 6142 – Basic Instructional Program)
- (cf. 6142.1 – Family Life and Sex Education)
- (cf. 6142.10 – Health Education)
- (cf. 6144.1 – Exemption from Instruction)
- (cf. 6144.3 – Controversial Speakers)
- (cf. 6145.5 – Organizations/Associations-Equal Access)
- (cf. 6160 – Educational Resources and Material)
- (cf. 6161 – Equipment, Books and Materials)
- (cf. 6161.1 – Evaluation/Selection of Instructional Materials)
- (cf. 6162.51 – Student Privacy/Surveys of Materials/Inspection of Materials)
- (cf. 6177 – Use of Commercially Produced Video Recordings)

Legal Reference: Connecticut General Statutes

31-51q Liability of employer for discipline or discharge of employee on account of employee's exercise of certain constitutional rights.
Academic Freedom Policy (adopted by Connecticut State Board of Education, 9/9/81)
Keyishian v. Board of Regents 395 U.S. 589, 603 (1967)
Garcetti v. Ceballos, (2006) 547 U.S. 410

Controversial Issues

Legal Reference: **Connecticut General Statutes** (continued)

Johnson v. Poway Unified School District, (2011) 658 F.3d 954 (9th Cir.)
Mayer v. Monroe County Community School Corporation, (2007) 474
F.3d 477 (7th Cir.)

Policy Adopted: **June 16, 2023**