

Policy 6144: Controversial Issues

Status: ADOPTED

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TVUSD believes that students should have opportunities to discuss controversial issues which have political, social, or economic significance and which the students are mature enough to investigate and address. The study of a controversial issue should help students learn how to gather and organize pertinent facts, discriminate between fact and fiction, draw intelligent conclusions, and respect the opinions of others.

TVUSD requires teachers to exercise caution and discretion when deciding whether or not a particular issue is suitable for study or discussion in any particular class. Teachers should not spend time on any topic which they feel is not suitable for the class or related to the established course of study.

TVUSD also requires teachers to ensure that all sides of a controversial issue are impartially presented with adequate and appropriate factual information. Without promoting any partisan point of view, the teacher should help students separate fact from opinion and warn them against drawing conclusions from insufficient data. The teacher shall not suppress any student's view on the issue as long as its expression is not malicious or abusive towards others. A recommended strategy in this area is the creation and teaching of class norms and expectations that focus on behavioral guidelines and mutual respect when having important conversations surrounding controversial issues.

Teachers sponsoring guest speakers shall either ask them not to use their position or influence on students to forward their own religious, political, economic, or social views or shall take active steps to neutralize whatever bias has been presented.

The public schools of the United States have the responsibility to educate students to be informed, conscientious citizens, capable of self-direction and critical thinking. In training young people to become effective citizens in our democracy, students must be given the opportunity to develop the ability to gain information about public issues, to evaluate facts, and to express themselves through discussion, writing, and the ballot.

The intelligent discussion of vital current public issues, often containing the element of controversy, is an important part of the education of youth for effective citizenship in our country. The democratic process itself is the resolving of controversy in an orderly fashion. Every American student has the right and responsibility to examine pertinent issues without prejudice. Only through an appreciation of all sides of a given issue can the student gain the wisdom to choose intelligently between proposed alternatives.

A. Definition of a Controversial Issue

An issue is controversial when the question is debatable and when some of its proposed solutions conflict with the intellectual or emotional commitments of citizens to cherished interests, beliefs, paradigms, worldviews, or group loyalties.

B. Purposes of the Study of Controversial Issues

The study of an issue should provide opportunities for students to develop techniques for examining any controversial issue and should strengthen or change their individual commitment to viewpoints reached through independent, systematic research.

Investigation of significant issues should strengthen the student's ability and will to study any complex life situation. It should enable the student to recognize the necessity for and the value of differing viewpoints and to appreciate the role of controversy as an instrument of progress.

The study of such issues shall have as its purpose the development of the following skills and attitudes:

1. The desire and ability to study relevant problems and to make intelligent choices from alternatives.
2. The desire and ability to use rational methods in considering significant issues.
3. The willingness to recognize that differing viewpoints are valuable and normal.
4. The recognition that reasonable compromise is often an important part of the democratic decision-making process.
5. The skill of analyzing and evaluating sources of information, recognizing propaganda, half-truths, and bias.

C. Rights of Students Towards Controversial Issues

For public schools, the policy on controversial issues is defined in terms of the rights of students. The student has four basic rights to be recognized:

1. The right to study any controversial issue which has political, economic, or social significance, which, at the student's age and maturity level, the student should begin to have an opinion.
2. The right to have free access to all relevant information, including the materials that circulate freely in the community.
3. The right to study under competent instruction in an atmosphere free from bias or prejudice.
4. The right to form and express individual opinions on controversial issues without jeopardizing relations with teachers or others.

D. The Selection of Issues or Applicable Guidelines for Controversial Issues

In general, controversial issues may be discussed in the classroom, provided that:

1. The issue is related to the course of study and provides opportunities for critical thinking, developing tolerance, and understanding conflicting points of view.
2. The topic shall be suitable to the age and maturity of the students.
3. Available information about the issue is sufficient to allow alternative points of view to be discussed and evaluated on a factual basis.
4. All sides of the issue are given a proper hearing, using established facts as primary evidence.
5. The issue has points of view which can be understood and defined by the students.
6. The teacher does not use his/her position to forward his/her own religious worldview, political, economic, or social bias. The teacher may express a personal opinion if he/she identifies it as such and does not express the opinion for the purpose of persuading students to his/her point of view.
7. Discussion or study of the issue is instigated by the students or by the established curriculum, but not by a source outside of the schools.
8. Students shall be assured of their right to form and express an opinion without jeopardizing their grades or being subject to discrimination, retaliation, or discipline, provided the viewpoint does not constitute harassment, threats, intimidation, bullying, or otherwise unlawful.
9. While employing the Socratic Method, students shall be informed of the conduct expected during such instruction and the importance of being courteous and respectful of the opinions of others.
10. The discussion does not reflect adversely upon persons because of their disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, nationality, race or ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or any other characteristic that is contained in the definition of hate crimes set forth in Section 422.55 of the Penal Code, including immigration status, in any program or activity conducted by an educational institution that receives, or benefits from, state financial assistance, or enrolls pupils who receive state student financial aid.
11. The oral or written presentation does not violate state or federal law.
12. The issue must be one which the teacher feels competent to handle.
13. Student emotions surrounding the issue must be considered by the teacher. Students should feel supported in engaging in the discussion surrounding the issue. Teachers should proceed cautiously and be aware when levels of emotion lead to an inability to study the subject rationally.

When a guest speaker is invited to make a presentation related to a controversial issue, whether in person or virtually, the site principal or designee shall notify them of expectations and goals regarding the presentation. If the guest speaker is presenting only one point of view on an issue, the principal or designee shall be responsible for informing students that the presentation represents one point of view on the issue at hand.

A student or parent/guardian with concerns regarding instruction about controversial issues should communicate directly with the teacher or principal.

When necessary, the Superintendent or designee may instruct teachers to refrain from sharing personal views in the classroom on controversial topics.
