

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN SCHOOLS

Guidelines on this issue were forwarded to Secondary Schools in 1977. In February 1983 the policy statement was revised and forwarded to Principals of all schools for information and appropriate action.

A. RATIONALE

1. In former times there was a fairly clearly defined relationship between the home and the school. The home, in concert with the church and other agencies, fulfilled the social role of inducting the child into society. The boundaries of teaching programs and processes were closely drawn. The rudiments of knowledge were stressed and there was a social consensus that some topics would be excluded from the school. Parents and teachers held clear expectations of each other's task.
2. The scene has changed. Parents now hold quite diverse views on the function of a school. Schools have come to be required to deal not only with matters of fact but also with a wide range of learning outcomes as well as attitudes, values and beliefs and, increasingly in recent years, with personal morality and ethical issues. Society is exerting a stronger influence on the school's role and schools tend to be playing an expanded role in the community. Further, the school has come to realise that the biases in presentation of the mass media, particularly television, are sometimes in conflict with family values and beliefs and inconsistent with the aims of the school. Thus teachers and students increasingly face changing, complex, societal situations which are less clearly defined.
3. In this context, it is important for schools to protect and to foster practices which have implications for the rights of teachers and students and parents. Nonetheless, at appropriate levels, the study of controversial issues may be seen as a valuable and significant part of the educational process.
4. Teaching approaches need to be sensitive, objective and balanced where controversial issues are considered by the school to have curriculum relevance.

B. BASIC PRINCIPLES

Consideration of controversial issues in schools, whether by the use of teaching-learning material or by way of views expressed by teachers or visiting speakers, should be in accord with the following basic principles.

1. Schools are neutral grounds for rational discourse and objective study. They should not become arenas for opposing political or other views.

2. Schools are places where students are preparing for informed and reasoned involvement in community life, including its politics, by calm and co-operative study of social; schools are not places for recruiting into partisan groups.
3. The school's educational policies and programs, developed within a statewide framework of aims and according to local needs, guide learning experiences within the school. Discussion of controversial issues is acceptable only when it clearly serves the purpose of the school's program. Such discussion is not intended to advance the interest of any group, political or otherwise.
4. Teachers and visiting resource persons in schools have a privileged position. They have the opportunity, denied to many other concerned people, to influence students and therefore they have a special responsibility to maintain objectivity, to avoid distortion of discussions, and to acknowledge the right of students and parents to hold a different viewpoint.
5. The school is responsible for that part of the educative process which it institutes, or which is conducted in school time. The school cannot transfer its accountability, wholly or in part, to people from outside the school, including the publishers and manufacturers of teaching-learning material used in the school.

C. IMPLEMENTATION

1. In discussions of controversial issues, the teacher should ensure that opinions are expressed and evidence is presented impartially. The teacher is not committed to unnatural neutrality but rather to preserving objectivity and avoiding special advocacy. The teacher's personal view should not intrude.

There will be occasions, however, when a statement of the teacher's views may be necessary to help students formulate their own views or to answer a request from students when such a request is relevant to the discussion. In such situations, the teacher's statement should be balanced and restrained and presented as one opinion to be considered critically along with any others.

2. Student activities, including public affairs clubs, devoted to consideration of political or other controversial issues, are acceptable within schools but partisan groups organised on restricted party lines are not acceptable. The proceedings of such activities must be in harmony with this policy.
3. The Principal's approval is required for the introduction of any visitor or visiting speaker to the school. It is implicit in the approval that the Principal will have ascertained the broad scope of content of the proposed address and that action will be taken to ensure that the speaker does not transgress the spirit of this policy on the consideration of controversial issues. The Regional Director is to be informed of any such serious transgression.

4. Generally the initiative for the introduction of speakers or controversial material presenting a particular viewpoint must come from the school in accordance with its education program and not from partisan or pressure groups seeking to use the school as a forum to advance their causes. If a scheme, initiated outside the school, is presented to the Principal, the Principal will exercise discretion within the framework of this policy.

Speakers addressing students on controversial matters in school time should therefore do so only in circumstances where these matters form part of a program organised by the school and controlled by a teacher.

5. Sessions involving visiting speakers should be planned so as to leave ample time for questions and comments by students.
6. The school should ensure a balanced and reasonable consideration of various viewpoints and to this end it should observe a balanced presentation, both in relation to views presented by speakers and expressed in material to be studied. It is the Principal's responsibility to determine where this balance rests.
7. Any literature or other materials must be approved by the Principal or a responsible nominee in the form in which they are to be presented to students. In the case of a film, the Principal may delegate the task of previewing the entire film to an executive member of staff who is then responsible for advising the Principal as to its suitability and acceptability. This delegation notwithstanding, the Principal retains the responsibility for granting approval or otherwise. If approval is not given, the material must not be used.
8. Distribution of material makes the school, in law, a publisher answerable for the views expressed. It is therefore advisable, if an extreme view is presented in any material to be handed to students, that students receive other materials covering all aspects of the issue.
9. The introduction into a school of speakers on controversial issues or the study of controversial material can itself generate controversy and misunderstanding. It is therefore essential to maintain communication between the school and the parents in relation to the school's educational program and the principles on which it is based. The school has a responsibility to inform parents, prior to the occasion, of the specific details of the program, so that the parents have time to exercise their rights of withdrawing their child from a particular session or sessions on certain controversial issues. In this regard, a parent's wish must be respected.
10. Visiting speakers must be made aware of Departmental policy and its implication in terms of the school's aims and methods. They should be prepared to respect the privilege accorded them and to acknowledge the rights of the school, its students and their parents. If visiting speakers will not guarantee to respect this policy, access to the students must be declined.

11. It is the responsibility of the Principal of the school to ensure that staff are familiar with the substance of this policy and that parents are made aware of its implication.