



POLICY

PROGRAM

**Haddonfield
Board of Education**

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Controversial Issues

2240 CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

The Board of Education believes that the consideration of controversial issues has a legitimate place in the instructional program of the schools. Properly introduced and conducted, the consideration of such issues can help students learn to identify important issues, explore fully and fairly all sides of an issue, weigh carefully the values and factors involved, and develop techniques for formulating and evaluating positions using verifiable sources.

For purposes of this policy a controversial issue is a topic

Choose one or more of the following statements:

- likely to arouse both support and opposition in the community.
- may or may not be expressly enumerated in the course guide as appropriate for the course of study.
- subject to interpretation as doctrinaire or inappropriate, each in relation to the level of maturity of the students concerned.
- on which opposing points of view have been expressed by reasonable and thoughtful persons.

The Board will permit the introduction and proper educational use of controversial issues provided that their use in the instructional program is related to the instructional goals of the course of study and level of maturity of the students. The discussion of controversial issues must not tend to indoctrinate students or persuade them to a particular point of view. Instead, teachers must encourage fair presentation and open-mindedness and the free exchange of ideas in a spirit of scholarly inquiry, drawing upon information and insights from the widest feasible range of resources.

The discussion of controversial issues in the classroom will be conducted in an unprejudiced and dispassionate manner and cannot be allowed to disrupt the educational process. In the discussion of any issue, a teacher may express a personal opinion, provided the expression is characterized as personal opinion and does not attempt to persuade students to the teacher's point of view.

The Superintendent shall assist teaching staff members in developing a sensitivity to the occurrence of controversial issues in the context of the curriculum and developing techniques for the management of controversial issues that do not stifle a spirit of free inquiry.



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Teachers play a vital role in helping students navigate our complex world. Many students view their classrooms as places to become more informed about controversial issues and to consider alternative perspectives. Students need to have opportunities to interact with peers who hold opposing views to understand others' positions and practice civil discourse skills.

Some teachers who want to engage in conversations about controversial issues may be concerned about divisiveness. Others may worry about student, parent, or administrator feedback that they seek to indoctrinate students or that their classrooms are too politicized. Yet, it is possible to structure teaching and learning in ways that help students gain critical thinking and civil discourse skills.

The discussion of controversial issues must not tend to indoctrinate students or persuade them to a particular point of view. Instead, teachers must encourage fair presentation, open-mindedness, and the free exchange of ideas in a spirit of scholarly inquiry, drawing upon information and insights from the broadest possible range of credible resources.

Just “winging it” is never a good idea, especially regarding controversial, sensitive, or complex issues. It's permissible to delay unanticipated discussion by acknowledging the concerns and giving all stakeholders time to gather themselves and set up a time and space to address the matter. When you plan to address the topics, consider your goal in teaching controversial issues. They may be used as teachable moments to learn how to have discussions and build consensus. Students increase their ability to recognize and accept different sides of an issue through critical thinking.

A. Strategies for Teaching Controversial Issues

- a. Staff shall establish clear ground rules (see below). Clarify what will and will not be permitted in terms of arguments and rhetoric, and make it clear to students the consequences if they ignore these rules.
- b. Staff shall model civil behavior through their actions. Students will watch to see how staff handle themselves. When staff speaks with respect and care in a heated discussion, students will also be more likely to do so.
- c. Staff shall moderate negative thinking and strong emotions in students and themselves.
- d. Staff shall model for students how to reframe strong feelings into productive dialogue.
- e. Teach them how to disagree with someone else's ideas without attacking them personally.

B. Sample ground rules for teaching controversial subjects: Students must agree on the ground rules before the discussion begins.



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- a. Staff and students should only make statements about an issue, person, or group if they are prepared to make the statement directly and respectfully to a person to whom the issue is important.
- b. Staff shall encourage students not to argue from authority and to link their claims and assertions to appropriate evidence whenever possible. Consider the introduction of [The Media Bias Chart](#) to consider the possible perspective of the source material.
- c. Cultivate “tentativeness” among students: encourage them to explore their fixed ideas and prejudices and recognize that confusion and uncertainty are stages in their development toward independent opinion.
- d. Listen respectfully, without interrupting.
- e. Listen actively and with an ear to understand others' views. (Don't just think about what you will say while someone else is talking.)
- f. Criticize ideas, not individuals.
- g. Commit to learning, not debating—comment in order to share information, not to persuade.
- h. Avoid blame, speculation, and inflammatory language.
- i. Allow everyone the chance to speak.
- j. Avoid assumptions about any member of the class or generalizations about social groups. Do not ask individuals to speak for their (perceived) social group.

Additional Resources

[Yale Center for Teacher and Learning: Teaching Controversial Topics](#)

[University of Michigan Center for Research on Teaching and Learning: Guidelines for Discussing Difficult or High-Stakes Topics](#)

[New Jersey Education Association: Discussing Controversial Topics in the Classroom](#)