

APPROACHING CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS POLICY

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I. Policy Statement

- A. The Spectrum School Board recognizes the role of public education in preparing students for effective citizenship; to think clearly and critically, to reason logically, and to differentiate between and analyze diverse perspectives. The instructional program developed to achieve these purposes will emphasize the rights and responsibilities of living in a diverse society.
- B. The Board recognizes that as students prepare for active engagement in a representative democracy, they often encounter topics or perspectives that may be considered controversial. The Board supports the examination of controversial topics related to approved curricula in an impartial and objective manner. The examination of controversial topics should occur in a supportive learning environment that includes and encourages respect for multiple perspectives.
- C. The Board values parents/guardians as the primary educators of their students. As such, the Board believes it is important that parents/guardians remain informed about topics their students are discussing or learning about in class. Building on the trust granted, Spectrum will provide transparency about topics and curriculum.
- D. The Board values teachers as professionals in the classroom and their role in developing, organizing, and implementing curriculum and instruction. The Board recognizes the importance of teachers working collaboratively with parents/guardians in educating students.

II. Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to establish guidelines for approaching controversial topics.

III. Definitions

- A. Citizenship – Having the right to participate in and to be represented in politics and for the purpose of this document refers to both global and national politics.
- B. Civil Discourse - Engagement in conversation intended to enhance understanding and communication in a kind and respectful manner.
- C. Controversial Topics – Significant academic, social, political, and ideological matters about which there exists opposing viewpoints and/or multiple perspectives.
- D. Curriculum – The prescribed elements of programs and courses which state clearly and specifically what students are to know and be able to do, how well they will be able to do it, how they will meet the learning objectives, and by what means they will be assessed. Sensitive and controversial topics are often components of the curriculum.
- E. Objective/Neutral – Not influenced by personal feelings or opinions in considering and representing perspectives. Teachers will do their best to remain neutral and objective when addressing these topics, asking thought-provoking questions and challenging students to support and explain their thoughts and weigh perspectives.
- F. Perspectives – A point of view; a particular attitude toward or way of regarding a topic.

- G. Representative Democracy – A process within which citizens either make decisions on policy and/or elect representatives to make laws and decisions on policy and implement those decisions.
- H. Sensitive Topics – A resolved historical fact (such as the Holocaust and slavery) that must be addressed in a manner that supports a safe learning environment for students. Conversations often include culture, demographics, and race. Spectrum attempts to remain aware of sensitive topics, but they can sometimes be considered sensitive based on timing of conversations, societal factors, demographics in the school, etc. Sensitive topics can also have political, economic, cultural, or social significance.

IV. Requirements

- A. A controversial topic may be addressed in the classroom when the following conditions are met:
 - 1. The topic has political, economic, cultural, or social significance and is presented within curricular guidelines and context.
 - 2. If the topic is for an individual lesson, parents/guardians have been notified at least two school days in advance to the content being presented and given the opportunity to review materials, discuss them with their student(s), and/or request that their student be exempted from the content with an alternative assignment.
If the topic covers a unit or several days of content, parents/guardians have been notified through the syllabus by highlighting specific controversial topics and the timeline for presentation at the beginning of the marking period. If it is not included in the syllabus, notification should be made at least a week prior to implementation. In either case, it is a good idea for teachers to also send out a reminder when the timeline is approaching.
 - 3. On occasion, discussions occur in classrooms that are unplanned and may fall into the controversial or sensitive topic category. When this is the case, the notification requirements will be adjusted. All other guidelines will remain in effect and parents/guardians will be notified as soon as possible after the class.
 - 4. The teacher has ensured students have been trained on and practiced having civil discourse.
 - 5. Students are provided access to information pertaining to the topic under study from a variety of sources with varying perspectives.
 - 6. Students are given the opportunity to form and express their own opinions on the topic without jeopardizing their relationships with teachers or the school.
- B. Controversial topics must be presented as follows:
 - 1. Content must be age appropriate.
 - 2. Content must be discussed or taught in context.
 - 3. One goal must be to encourage discussion and build mutual understanding of the topic in a learning environment that is safe, supportive, and focused on an academic examination of the topic with access to and respect for multiple perspectives and sources.
 - 4. The school will be intentionally transparent in a timely manner about content being taught. This includes topics, timeline, and curriculum being utilized.
 - 5. Parents will have the opportunity to exempt their student(s) from the content through written notice to the teacher.
 - 6. If the standards being assessed are required, alternative assignments may be required, or the content may need to be addressed at home with verification provided. Students/families' preferences will be respected and students will not be singled out by staff.
 - 7. Content will be in alignment with the school system's curriculum, mission, and vision.

8. Teachers who choose to teach on controversial topics will do so in an objective, neutral, and impartial manner. Teachers who have concerns about presenting a controversial topic will seek assistance from the Coordinator of Curriculum and Instruction about methods for facilitating a discussion – if it is essential to the curriculum or course.
- C. The use of resource speakers in teaching controversial topics is permitted in accordance with the [Resource Speaker Guidelines](#) and also requires prior parent notification.
- D. Topics can sometimes increase or decrease in their level of controversy based on current cultural or political events. As such, curriculum can become controversial and should not necessarily be considered as noncontroversial simply because it has been used in previous years.
- E. A list of controversial or sensitive topics will be developed by administration for staff and parents/guardians to access in connection with this policy and updated as needed.

V. Responsibilities

- A. The Executive Director will ensure that students, parents, and employees have access to this policy annually on the school website. It will also be highlighted in each syllabus that includes controversial topics.
- B. Teachers or presenters will present information in an objective neutral manner, ensure various perspectives are represented, model good citizenship, teach students how to have civil discourse, and maintain adherence to related Spectrum policies. Teachers will make parents/guardians aware of controversial or sensitive content in a timely manner.
- C. District administration will develop and implement school-based procedures for approving controversial topics to be considered in the classroom.
- D. The Coordinator of Curriculum and Instruction will provide assistance, advice, and training with regard to the teaching of controversial topics.
- E. Students will be respectful of varying perspectives and treat each other with respect.
- F. Parents/Guardians will receive information on planned discussion content related to controversial or sensitive topics either in the syllabus or in advance of the discussion/teaching.
Parents/Guardians will have the opportunity to exempt their student(s) from content and understand that standards may need to be covered at home or through an alternative assignment.

VI. Adherence to Policy

- A. All teachers and staff are expected to adhere to the guidelines identified in this policy to the best of their ability.
- B. If a parent/guardian or student feels that controversial or sensitive topics were addressed outside of the guidelines laid out in this policy, they should speak with the teacher first to seek clarification. If further action is desired, the principal should be contacted.