

Dell Rapids School District #49-3

Policies and Regulations Code: INB – Instruction



INB TEACHING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL/SENSITIVE ISSUES

To enable students to learn how to become effective citizens, the public schools have an obligation to prepare them for intelligent and conscientious participation in a democratic social order. Such participation may involve students having the opportunity to become cognizant of public issues; to learn the skills of analyzing current problems and arguments; to distinguish between fact and opinion; to gather and organize pertinent facts; and to respect the opinions of others. The schools are one means by which students have the opportunity to identify, form, and express their own opinions on controversial or sensitive issues.

Controversial and sensitive issues include matters characterized by significant differences of opinion, usually generated from differing and underlying values, beliefs, and interests, which produce significant social tension. Controversy and sensitivity arising from such differences is inherent in a pluralistic society. Public education may provide students with an understanding of how controversial and sensitive issues are dealt with in a democracy. This includes the opportunity to learn about the issues, problems, and concerns of contemporary society; to form opinions; and to participate in discussion of these issues and expressions of opinion in the classroom.

In considering such issues, the schools may provide students with the opportunity:

1. to study any controversial or sensitive issue which has political, economic, or social significance and concerning which (at the appropriate level) the student should begin to form an opinion.
2. to have access to relevant information, including the materials that circulate freely in the community.
3. to study under competent instructors in an objective atmosphere free from bias and prejudice. The instructor will provide resources, materials, or sources of information on as many aspects of the issue as he/she can in order that all students may reach individual conclusions with regard to the particular issue.
4. to form and express personal opinions on controversial and sensitive issues without jeopardizing the relationship between the student and his/her teacher, while respecting minority opinions.
5. to recognize that reasonable compromise is often an important facet in decision making in our society.
6. to be graded upon the quality of the student's work in developing and articulating an opinion, not based upon the student's opinions on the issue(s).

Teachers are not to teach stances on controversial issues but rather provide opportunities for students to formulate positions on controversial or sensitive issues by guiding students in researching the issues and the opinions of others and assisting students in developing rationale for their personal positions.

In order to assure that instruction which encompasses a controversial or sensitive issue is handled in a neutral manner, teachers must adhere to the following guidelines for selection and study of controversial and sensitive issues in the classroom and act in conformance with state law and other district policies:

1. Instruction must follow approved curriculum and be appropriate for students. Instruction that involves controversial or sensitive issues and/or materials must be within the district content standards and curriculum, and must be age and class/grade appropriate. The overriding educational purpose of teaching about controversial and sensitive issues or using controversial or sensitive materials must be student achievement in the academic subjects and students' civic development, rather than reaching conclusions as to the correctness of any particular point of view. The instruction must reflect due consideration of the maturity of the students, the values of the community, sound professional judgment, and coordination with the administration.
2. Guidelines on presenting controversial and sensitive issues. Where controversial and sensitive issues are selected and studied, teachers should make materials available to students concerning the various aspects of the issues. Do not expect or require that the class reach an agreement. When selecting or studying controversial or sensitive issues, teachers must work cooperatively with their principal and other administrators.
3. Use of learning resources. Teachers may not use learning resources that are not approved by the administration and that are controversial or sensitive because of the manner or context in which they discuss controversial or sensitive issues. Examples of such materials include, but are not limited to, those that depict explicit sexual conduct, graphic violence, profanities, drug use, or other socially undesirable behaviors, or materials that are likely to divide the community along racial, ethnic, or religious lines. Teachers desiring to bring resource people into the classroom to discuss a particular viewpoint on a controversial or sensitive issue must first obtain the endorsement of the principal. Care must be taken by the teacher not to expose any one viewpoint as more acceptable than another. If a teacher has a question as to whether a resource is controversial or sensitive, he or she should contact the principal.
4. Discipline for inappropriately teaching controversial or sensitive issues. In matters relating to controversial or sensitive issues and learning materials, the superintendent and Board of Education will exercise final authority in deciding whether discussion of a controversial or sensitive issue follows established professional ethics, content standards, and curriculum and is appropriate for students. If the superintendent and/or board believe that a teacher is not following the above guidelines, appropriate penalties and discipline will result, up to and including termination of a teacher's employment.

Proposed: July 12, 2004

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