

Teaching about Controversial/Sensitive Issues

The Board of Education recognizes the problem inherent in dealing with ideas in a complex and many-sided culture in which conflicting ideas on religious, political, economic and social matters are held by substantial portions of the population. It is inevitable that the expression of any one opinion will come into conflict with one or more opposite opinions.

The concept and tradition of academic freedom does not hold that a teacher is endowed with rights and privileges which other persons do not have. Rather it holds that a teacher has the same rights as others in activities of seeking and revealing truth. Further, the concept and tradition of academic freedom carries with it the responsibility on the part of teachers for maintaining individually and collectively the highest possible standards of professional responsibility, professional ethics, good taste and common sense. The student also has the right to receive information which contains all points of view on a controversial issue.

Nor is it held that public participation in school affairs is bad. On the contrary, it is desirable. What is bad is the setting up of pressures and barriers to prevent teachers from proceeding as best they know how.

It must be recognized that the school is the primary instrument by which our culture is transmitted from one generation to the next. Only the school is able, in an organized way, to encourage development of a relatively homogeneous society which can be called distinctively American. The Board subscribes to this traditional role of the American public school.

Nevertheless, nothing is perfect and without prospect of being improved. Clearly there are aspects of the American way of life with which few if any of its citizens are completely satisfied. If our culture is to improve, it must be examined. If it is to be examined, it must be criticized. But if it is to be improved, the criticism must be constructively aimed toward that end.

The concept and tradition of academic freedom is not designed to protect the individual but rather to protect a process—the process of seeking and revealing the truth.

Constructive criticism seeks in its analysis to discover the precise nature of a particular idea, institution or condition; to trace its origins; to outline its effects; to show the relationships to other ideas, institutions or conditions, and to suggest measures by which the idea, institution or condition may more fully and advantageously serve our culture. In its most practical aspects, academic freedom in the schools is the freedom and general well-being of all.

Destructive criticism using the techniques of propaganda and faulty logic seeks not to improve but to abolish a particular idea, institution or condition which the critic holds as a personal opinion to be detrimental to American culture. Destructive criticism follows no procedure, aims toward no usable end, and may degenerate into carping and name-calling.

Like any freedom, academic freedom carries responsibilities. It is not a license for abuses. It may not serve as a cloak for indoctrination.

Given these definitions, the Board believes in the academic obligation of teachers to engage in constructive criticism in the classroom and to encourage their students to pursue this ideal. A basic aspect of academic freedom concerns freedom of the student to learn. To keep consideration of vital and controversial topics out of the schools is to handicap students in getting facts, discussing problems and reaching conclusions on their own, both in school and in later life. Freedom to learn is an implied right in a democracy.

Each teacher has the right and the obligation to teach about controversial issues. It is his responsibility to select issues for study and discussion which contribute to the attainment of course objectives and the educational program established by the Board and to make available to students materials concerning the various aspects of the issues. He also has the obligation to be as objective as possible and to present fairly the several sides of an issue. Although he has the right to express his own viewpoint and opinions, he does not have the right to indoctrinate students to his views. Controversial issues are to be presented with good judgment, keeping in mind the maturity and background of the students. The influence on values, attitudes and responsibility of the individual students must be considered in conjunction with the actual subject content.

Each building administrator shall be responsible for insuring that teachers have a wide field of academic freedom on one hand while exercising it wisely, objectively and prudently on the other.

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