



THE IMPORTANCE OF DISCUSSING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN THE CLASSROOM—ESPECIALLY TODAY

A White Paper on Policy Supports for New York Teachers

Schools have a critical role in preparing students to function productively as civic participants. Schools are places where students can learn civic knowledge and civic skills, develop civic mindsets, and engage in civic experiences. Schools also provide a rare setting in our highly polarized society where students can engage with multiple perspectives in a safe environment that encourages rational discussion. Appropriate instruction in dealing with controversial issues is a vital aspect of civic education because it develops democratic dispositions in which people see each other as political equals, respect other points of view, weigh evidence, and become informed about the political issues they will confront in the public sphere.

American democracy today is in peril. Recent events have demonstrated that large numbers of people do not know the basic facts about how our governmental institutions work, lack a sense of civic responsibility, and are not aware of the central constitutional values that underlie our democratic culture. Indeed, John G. Roberts, the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, recently warned that:

[W]e have come to take democracy for granted, and civic education has fallen by the wayside. In our age, when social media can instantly spread rumor and false information on a grand scale, the public’s need to understand our government, and the protections it provides, is ever more vital. (*Chief Justice’s End of the Year Message*, 2019)

The New York Court of Appeals, the state’s highest court, has held that all students have a right under the state constitution to the opportunity for a “sound basic education,” and the court defined that right in terms of providing all students a meaningful opportunity to develop the skills they need to “function productively as civic participants” (*CFE v. State of New York*, 100 N.Y. 2d 893, 908 (2003)). The New York State Board of Regents has taken note of this requirement and has adopted a number of policies aimed at bolstering the civic preparation of our students. These include issuing a detailed definition of civic readiness, encouraging school

districts to offer students the opportunity to undertake substantial civic capstone projects, and awarding a Seal of Civic Readiness to the diplomas of students who have demonstrated a high degree of civic preparation. The Regents have also specifically emphasized that among the skills all students need to develop is the ability to “Demonstrate respect for the rights of others in discussions and classroom debates, and how to respectfully disagree with other viewpoints and provide evidence for a counterargument” (NYS Education Department, Civic Readiness Initiative, available at <http://www.nysed.gov/curriculum-instruction/civic-readiness-initiative>).

Developments in some other states, however, have gone in an opposite direction, actively discouraging robust civic education by prohibiting discussion of certain controversial issues in the classroom. Although no such laws, regulations, or other policy proposals have gained traction in New York State, awareness of these actions has had a chilling effect on teachers, throughout the country and some parents in New York State have expressed opposition to the discussion of topics perceived to be controversial.

Ironically, then, although teaching students the critical analytic skills involved in conducting respectful conversations with people who hold different views has become more essential in our increasingly polarized society, schools are encountering more impediments than ever in carrying out this important responsibility. This is why school boards, parents, and families and local communities need to understand the importance of promoting appropriate discussions of controversial issues in the classroom.

Liberals and conservatives have long agreed on the critical importance of promoting discussion of controversial issues in the classroom. Thus, Pedro Noguera, dean of the Rossiter School of Education at the University of Southern California and a noted progressive scholar, recently stated: “We should teach our students how to disagree respectfully and how to debate intelligently using evidence rather than threats of violence to support their views. Democracy and the social contract that holds us together as a society depend on our ability to do this” (Frederick M. Hess and Pedro A. Noguera, *A Search for Common Ground*, 2021, p. 79).

Similarly, Robert Pondiscio, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, and his colleague Tracey Schirra, recently wrote that conservatives should

[E]ncourage schools and teachers to embrace controversial issues in the classroom ... [by] stipulat[ing] that teachers are welcomed and encouraged to address age-appropriate controversial topics with students, so long as teachers provide students access to varying points of view when they do so. A school district would work with its constituents to define what qualifies a topic as “controversial” (Robert Pondiscio and Tracey Schirra, *Using Codes of Conduct to Ensure Viewpoint Diversity and Restore Trust in Schools*, AEI, Nov. 2021)

Developing Policy Guidelines

To support and actively encourage teachers to promote classroom discussions of controversial issues, we recommend consideration of the following concepts and sources for developing policy guidelines for schools and districts:

Choosing Appropriate Issues for Discussion

The scope of issues that might be considered controversial is broad, and what is controversial in one context may not be controversial in another. The content of these issues may vary from local problems to issues international in scale and may include historical or current controversies. Some fact-based issue that may have been controversial in the past may no longer be controversial if, for example, scientists, historians, or social scientists have achieved broad consensus on that issue.

Paula McAvoy and Diana Hess, two noted scholars on these issues, have offered a number of suggestions for selecting the “right” issues. They distinguish between “open empirical questions” for which there is a current scientific debate, and “closed empirical questions,” like the impact of fossil fuels on climate change, that have been sufficiently answered with evidence by a consensus of scientists in the area. They also distinguish between “closed policy issues” like “should women have the right to vote,” and “open policy issues” such as whether the United States should continue sanctions against Iran (Paula McAvoy and Diana Hess, *Classroom Deliberation in an Era of Political Polarization, Curriculum Inquiry*, January 2013, pp. 38-40). Issues for which there has never been a factual basis, like Holocaust denial, should be excluded from classroom discussions.

McAvoy and Hess also point out that, even in communities that appear to be extremely homogeneous, there tends to be wide ideological diversity among students, and the range of views tends to be far wider than in their homes. Even in rare cases where most students tend to think alike, teachers can expose students to competing views and challenge them to question political views they may have unreflectively adopted from their communities.

Jonathan Zimmerman and Emily Robertson offer an additional insight on the question of which controversial issues are appropriate for classroom discussion. Although generally they support discussion of “maximally controversial issues,” they also believe that discussion of some contemporary issues should be avoided in certain times and places because they put “the teacher and the school in too much conflict with the local community or the students’ parents.” They argue that it is possible to develop students’ abilities to deal with controversial issues while discussing less locally fraught issues: “There is no reason to gratuitously pick fights with the local community and place teachers or local schools in difficult situations” (*Teaching Controversial Issues in American Schools*, 2017, pp. 66-67). A contemporary example of an issue that schools might do well to avoid is whether schools should require students to wear masks throughout the school day. Similarly, sensitive issues that may threaten the personal dignity of

particular students, like immigration policy, might also be considered inappropriate in some communities.¹

School districts may want to consider adding a discussion of the importance of instruction in dealing with controversial issues to the agenda at school board meetings, curriculum nights, or other public forums. Such conversations would apprise parents and families of the importance of equipping their children with the essential democratic skill of being able to understand and discuss controversial issues and inform them about how the Board's policies promote balanced, evidence-based ways that conversations on controversial issues should be pursued. These events would also provide parents and families an opportunity to identify issues that may not be appropriate for discussion "in that particular community at that particular time."

Pedagogical Approaches

Recent research has revealed many, if not most, teachers feel unprepared and systemically unsupported in dealing with controversial issues (Laura Hamilton et al., *Preparing Children and Youth for Civic Life in the Era of Truth Decay*, 2020; Daniella DiGiacomo et al., Civic Education in a Politically Polarized Era, *Peabody Journal of Education*, 2021, pp. 261-274). For this reason, school boards and administrators need to actively encourage teachers to engage in more of these activities and to provide professional development and other supports to allow them to do so effectively.

Specific items that school boards might include in their guidelines are:

1. In selecting discussion issues, teachers should adhere to the district curriculum and also consider their students' interests, experiences, and expertise regarding the issue, as well as the relevance of issues to their students' lives, their students' maturity level, and the significance of the issue to society.
2. To prepare students for discussion, teachers should invest time in teaching their students to use deliberative discussion techniques, as well as communicate their own commitment to providing a space for honest, civil discourse.
3. Teachers need to provide adequate information sources to ensure that students are prepared to handle an issue in a discussion and have acquired background knowledge prior to the discussion. Background information may be provided through readings, lectures, films, guest speakers, or field trips. Teachers should work

¹ Note, however, that, as Pondiscio and Schirra from the American Enterprise Institute point out, heated topics like structural racism can be appropriate topics for discussion if approached in a balanced way since "facts withstand scrutiny and lose none of their power when subject to debate and counterclaims" (p. 4).

in collaboration with school library media specialists to identify appropriate materials.

The creation of an intellectually and social-emotionally safe environment for student participation is one of the most important elements of successful discussions. Teachers should establish an identity-affirming arena for and during the discussion of controversial issues. Teachers should also model appropriate discussion behaviors by carefully listening to and respecting students' contributions. Teachers should welcome divergent views and encourage their expression. Students must understand that they may not interrupt each other's comments and that they may disagree without being disagreeable.

4. A primary role of the teacher in facilitating classroom discussions is to ensure that students are exposed to a range of reasonable perspectives on any issue considered. Teachers should actively solicit a wide array of opinions about discussed issues and expose students to a fair hearing of competing points of view. If important viewpoints on a given issue are not expressed, they may be elicited through careful questioning, or they may be provided by asking students to consider the interests of someone who would present that perspective. Good discussion guides that provide a fair range of perspectives are available on many controversial issues.
5. Teachers who have concerns or feel they need further guidance about facilitating a discussion of a controversial issue in the classroom should seek assistance from a supervisor.

Supplemental Sources

Helpful sources on choosing appropriate topics for controversial discussion and suggestions for maximizing the value of these lessons can be found at the following websites:

- Facing History: [How Do We Talk About Issues That Matter?](#)
- Teaching for Democracy: <http://www.teachingfordemocracy.org/classroom-discussion.html>; and
- Choices Program: <https://www.choices.edu/teaching-news-lesson/teaching-about-controversial-issues-a-resource-guide/>

Issue guides that teachers might consult or recommend to their students to promote balanced discussions of controversial issues include:

- National Issues Forums, <https://www.nifi.org/> (click order materials and then issue guides)

- ProCon.org, <https://www.procon.org/>
- Choices Program, <https://www.choices.edu/> (they also have a section called Teaching with the News)
- Close Up, <https://www.closeup.org/controversial-issues-in-the-news/>

A variety of Instructional methods for teaching students how to discuss controversial issues are included in the following:

- Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy (2015), *The Political Classroom*
- Shira Eve Epstein (2014), *Teaching Civic Literacy Projects: Student Engagement with Social Problems*
- D.W. Johnson and R.T. Johnson (2009), *Energizing Learning: The Instructional Power of Conflict*, *Educational Researcher*, 38(1), 37-51.
- Jane C. Lo (ed.) (2022), *Making Classroom Discussions Work: Methods for Quality Dialogue in the Social Studies*
- Judith L. Pace (2015) *The Charged Classroom: Predicaments and Possibilities for Democratic Education*
- Walter Parker (2010), *Listening to Strangers: Classroom Discussion in Democratic Education*, *Teachers College Record*, 112, 2815–2832.
- Teaching Controversies website (operated by Judith Pace and supported by the Spencer Foundation), <https://teachingcontroversies.com/>
- American Library Association’s Tool Kit on Selecting Materials on Controversial Topics, www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport/selectionpolicytoolkit/controversial

Useful discussions of when it may be appropriate for teachers to mention their personal views on controversial issues, and the law on school districts’ authority to issue policies regarding articulation of teacher viewpoints can be found in these articles:

- Joan Richardson, *Using Controversy as a Teaching Tool: An Interview with Diana Hess*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, Dec. 2017, p. 15, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0031721717745542>
- Julie Underwood, *School Districts Control Teachers Classroom Speech*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, Jan. 2018, pp. 75-77, <https://kappanonline.org/underwood-school-districts-control-teachers-classroom-speech/>