

Policy 0602-20

Teaching Controversial Issues

Purpose Statement:

The goal of this policy is to provide support and guidance regarding the expectations for academic freedom and responsibility in teaching controversial issues as aligned with our district philosophy outlined in Policy 100.1, the Code of Ethics for Idaho Professional Educators, the Idaho Content Standards, and West Ada School District Curriculum.

The Code of Ethics for Idaho Professional Educators states in part: “Believing in the worth and dignity of each human being, the professional educator recognizes the supreme importance of pursuing truth, striving toward excellence, nurturing democratic citizenship and safeguarding the freedom to learn and to teach while guaranteeing equal educational opportunity for all. The professional educator accepts the responsibility to practice the profession according to the highest ethical principles. The professional educator provides an environment that is safe to the cognitive, physical and psychological well-being of students and provides opportunities for each student to move toward the realization of his or her goals and potential as an effective citizen. The professional educator, recognizing that students need role models, will act, speak and teach in such a manner as to exemplify nondiscriminatory behavior and encourage respect for other cultures and beliefs.”

With the district philosophy and the Code of Ethics in mind; The district shall offer courses of study which will afford learning experiences appropriate to the grade and/or age level of the student. The instructional program shall respect the right of students to face issues; to have free access to valid and reliable information; to study under teachers in situations free from prejudice; and to form, hold and express their own opinions without discrimination.

Additionally, it is important for students to have opportunities to interact with and discuss opposing viewpoints without fear of denigration, discrimination, or pressure to adopt someone else’s beliefs or opinions.

Definitions:

- **Academic Freedom:** Freedom of inquiry, objective scholarship, and consideration of the rights and welfare of others are essential to the educational process.
- **Reliability and Validity:** Reliability and validity are concepts used to evaluate the quality of research and information. Reliability concerns the consistency of information. Validity represents the accuracy and credibility of information.

Section A

The Board of Trustees recognizes the need for the teacher to have academic freedom to objectively discuss and teach subjects and issues which may be controversial using valid and reliable resources. Such subjects and issues may include but are not necessarily limited to:

- Government/Politics
- Social Studies
- History
- English/Literature
- Science
- Philosophy, Values, and Ethics
- Speech/Debate
- Current Events
- Health Education – See Policy 602.40
- Fine Arts & Performing Arts

Section B

Teachers shall guide discussions and procedures with thoroughness and objectivity to acquaint students with the need to recognize differing viewpoints, the importance of fact, the value of good judgment, and the virtue of respect for conflicting opinions and civil discourse.

The Board recognizes academic freedom as a necessary condition to aid in maintaining an environment conducive to learning.

In the study or discussion of controversial issues or materials, however, the Board directs the teaching staff to consider the following criteria:

- the necessity of seeking prior guidance and counsel from the building principal in such matters when practicable,
- relative maturity of students,
- district mission, vision, and goals,
- the necessity of covering the given topic in alignment with state standards,
- the necessity to provide an objective presentation, and

- compliance with federal laws, state laws, and district policy.

Section C

Because of its responsibility to guarantee academic freedom to both students and teachers, the Board expects that:

- all classroom lessons will be curriculum-related, objective, and impartial;
- teachers will create and maintain an atmosphere of open-mindedness
- teachers will not attempt, directly or indirectly, to limit or control students' judgment but will make certain that full and fair consideration is given, and that facts and background contextual information is carefully examined as to its accuracy and interpretation. It is not the teacher's role to provide or enforce the teacher's own personal beliefs or opinions or to require any student to alter their own existing beliefs or opinions;
- speech or language must remain consistent with the district's student discipline policies, including but not limited to Policy 502.70 and 502.90 as well as all policies of the district relating to equal opportunities and discrimination, including but not limited to, 403.71, 403.73 and 403.80;
- teachers will exercise professional judgment in determining the appropriateness of the issue to the curriculum and to the age and grade level of the students;
- teachers will collaborate and seek guidance and counsel from the building principal on such matters when practicable, and
- teachers will guide classroom discussions with students. We recognize and encourage students to have a voice in classroom discussions. Teachers will redirect conversations and/or encourage students to discuss these topics at home with their parents when the discussion strays from the intended learning outcome, and/or becomes inappropriate.
- when discussing controversial topics, the historical context from that historical period will be explored as part of creating an understanding of the overall context for the discussion.
- grading will not be based on a student's opinion, or viewpoint on an issue, but rather on their mastery of the content standards.

If there is reason to believe this policy is not being adhered to, individuals are directed to follow the grievance policy outlined in Policy 203.03.