

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES EDUCATION

Background

Controversial issues are those topics which are publicly sensitive and on which there is no consensus of values or belief. By their nature, controversial issues generate diverse opinions and debate on the distinctions between right and wrong, justice and injustice, and on the interpretations of fairness and tolerance. They include topics on which reasonable people may sincerely disagree and may reflect positions quite different than those taken by the Catholic Church.

Opportunities to deal with sensitive issues and topics are an integral part of the education programs and schooling process in Alberta schools. Courses of study and education programs must handle controversial issues in a manner that respects the rights and opinions reflected in different perspectives, but that rejects extreme or unethical positions. In all dealings with controversial issues and materials, the Catholic perspective must be included in the presentation and considerations.

For sound judgements to be made, students must have experiences in selecting, organizing and evaluating information. The educational benefits to be gained by studying controversial issues include the development of critical thinking, moral reasoning, and an awareness and understanding of contemporary society.

The Division believes that studying controversial issues is important in preparing students to participate responsibly in a democratic and pluralistic society. Such study provides opportunities to develop student capacities to think clearly, to reason logically, to open-mindedly and respectfully examine different points of view, and to reach sound judgements.

Students should have classroom experiences that cover a wide range of issues and areas of study. However, it is important that the issues and materials used within the school are consistent with the standards and values of the Catholic faith and the community.

Procedures

1. The *Guide to Education*, sections dealing with “Controversial Issues” and “Notice under Section 11.1 of the *Alberta Human Rights Act*” provides guidance to administrators and teachers in dealing with issues that may be controversial.
2. Information regarding controversial issues should:
 - 2.1 Represent alternate points of view; subject to the condition that information presented is not restricted by any federal or provincial law;
 - 2.2 Reflect the maturity, capabilities and educational needs of the students;
 - 2.3 Reflect the requirements of the course as stated in the Program of Studies;
 - 2.4 Reflect the neighbourhood and community in which the school is located, but not to the exclusion of provincial, national and international contexts.

3. The Principal is responsible for the following when programs and materials that are controversial are provided in the school:
 - 3.1 Inform the Superintendent or designate regarding the issues to be covered, the materials to be used and the approach to instruction in the classroom;
 - 3.2 Review program content and material to ensure conformity to Board Policies and Administrative Procedures;
 - 3.3 Communicate to parents the nature of the program and hold a parent meeting (if required) to review program content and materials;
 - 3.4 Respond to parental concerns and inform parents of their right to exclude their children from certain program elements;
 - 3.5 Ensure that staff are adequately in-serviced to provide effective program delivery; and
 - 3.6 Ensure that alternative learning activities are provided for excluded students.
4. Parents may request, in writing, the exclusion of their child from formal instruction or activities dealing with a particular controversial issue.
5. Parents have the right to formally challenge the use of a particular instructional resource on the grounds of sexual, racial, ethnical or cultural stereotyping or offensiveness to community standards. The parent shall be referred to Administrative Procedure 207 – Challenge to Learning Resources.

Reference: Section 20, 39, 60, 61, 113, School Act
Alberta Bill of Rights
Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom, Constitution Act, 1982
Guide to Education ECS to Grade 12