With parent and community input, the school board can develop policies that will prevent unnecessary conflicts and help resolve others.

It is crucial to establish a solid foundation for dealing with controversial issues in the curriculum—preferably by school board policies. Such policies protect not just the teaching staff, but parents and community members as well.

Of primary importance is the need for the school board to adopt instructional goals that reflect the desires of the community. Clear goal statements developed with community input provide direction for what is to be accomplished throughout the instructional program. For instance, a goal statement such as "Learn how to be a productive citizen" can set the stage for teaching students decision-making skills using the issue of abortion as the context. Both decision making and abortion may be controversial in some communities. However, agreed-upon goals will help establish a basis for teaching this content.

Specific curriculum scope and sequence based on goals should be developed by staff members who have expertise in particular content areas for adoption by the school board. Before a final draft is presented to the board, it is helpful to have it reviewed by experts outside the school district.

Additionally, general criteria for selecting instructional materials that support the curriculum should be part of board policy. These guidelines should include items such as (1) accuracy, objectivity, and scholarship of information presented; (2) recognized standards of educational, literary, and scientific value; and (3) provisions for individual differences in intelligence and maturity among students.

If parents are asked to serve on a materials selection committee, they should be more supportive of the content being taught even if they're not entirely sold on it. You may not change a concerned parent's viewpoint completely, but you will be able to illustrate by the work of the selection committee the thoroughness and seriousness of the materials selection process. Also, publicizing the fact that parents are part of the materials selection committee can provide a broader base of support when the materials are adopted by the board. All parents and community members should have an opportunity to review—via formal presentations or informal displays—the materials that are being considered for adoption.

Involving Parents and Staff Members
School board policy should also establish procedures for parents or community members to make suggestions or to challenge the content and instructional materials used in the classroom. A review panel—including at least one parent and a person professionally qualified in the particular subject area—should study any materials or topics that are challenged and report their recommendations to the school board for a final decision.

Policies should state that student participation in instruction on selected sensitive issues is optional. Some parents, for example, feel strongly that it is solely their responsibility to discuss human sexuality with their children.

Once the various policies and curriculums are in place, administrators need to work directly with teachers in classrooms, so that they have firsthand knowledge of what is going on.

Staff development for teachers and administrators should emphasize the process of investigating all sides of an issue so that the content may be presented as objectively as possible. Consistency of what is taught by different teachers is also important. All of the teachers teaching about the Equal Rights Amendment, for example, need to explore and discuss the same major issues.

Having policies in place will not prevent confrontation with concerned parents or pressure groups. If a concern is raised, be sure to keep yourself composed and remain calm. Don't overreact and become defensive. Listen to concerns and, if necessary, initiate the board policy and procedures. Most concerned people, when given the specific data, will support the responsible teaching of controversial issues.

Controversial issues in the curriculum need not be avoided. They provide an opportunity for students to explore, debate, and discuss contemporary problems. But it is crucial that school districts systematically plan for their inclusion in the curriculum.