Resources on Controversy in the Curriculum

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Here is a selected list of sources that educators may find informative as they consider how to deal with controversial issues in the schools. Included are references that address the types of objections frequently raised about instructional materials, ideas for school policy, the position statement of a professional organization on the teaching of controversial issues, teaching suggestions for the classroom, and legal considerations related to handling controversial issues and academic freedom for precollege teachers.

A Brief Report of the 1977 NCTE Censorship Survey

This chapter presents the results of a survey of secondary English teachers to assess censorship problems they have encountered. The results of the survey help provide perspective on the extent that censorship can be a problem in the selection of curriculum materials. The survey found, for example, that 49 percent of the respondents reported some form of attempted or completed censorship. Objections to books tended to center around issues related to language and to the erotic qualities of some books. The survey also includes a list of 100 books identified as controversial and noncontroversial that are frequently found in school libraries.

The Iowa Model Policy and Rules for Selection of Instructional Materials

Frequent advice to educators about teaching controversial issues is to have a clearly stated school board policy on the selection of instructional materials. Larry Bartlett has done a careful job of drafting a model of policy and rules related to the nature of instructional materials selection, the assignment of responsibility for selection, and continued evaluation by school staff members. In addition, the policy addresses the need for appropriate review and consideration of community concerns. This model policy was drafted by a committee of educators and was reviewed by several teachers and lawyers. It takes account of important court rulings that relate to the handling of controversial materials.

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NCSS Position Statement on the Freedom to Teach and the Freedom to Learn


This statement by the National Council for the Social Studies represents a strong endorsement and rationale for the right and responsibility of teachers at the precollege level to examine controversial issues openly in the classroom. Support for this position is based on the democratic commitment to open inquiry and of the importance to decision making of the expression of opposing informed views and the free examination of ideas. NCSS recognizes that it will take many years of litigation before matters related to academic freedom for precollege teachers are fully resolved by the courts.

Secondary Social Studies: Instruction, Curriculum, and Evaluation


This book is one of the few teaching methods texts that has a chapter devoted to dealing with controversial issues. It does an excellent job of defining the types of subjects that tend to be controversial, presenting a rationale on the value of teaching about controversial issues in a democracy, and describing teaching strategies. Also included is a helpful procedure for handling complaints. The first step in this process is inviting the complainant to seriously discuss the problem. If the complainant is not satisfied with the explanation, additional steps include insisting that the complaint be put in writing, contacting school administrators, keeping an accurate record of the dates and the substance of all discussions with the complainant and school administrators, requesting a hearing before the school board, and requesting assistance from various professional associations.

Classrooms in the Crossfire


This highly readable book is a useful source for educators who are concerned about a wide range of issues related to academic freedom and the handling of controversial issues in the classroom. A major focus of the book is the interpretation of numerous court cases that affect classroom teachers, school administrators, librarians, parents, and community groups. The book presents a balanced approach that takes account of the substantive concerns of professionals in education and local communities. Issues addressed include religion in the schools, the use of obscene language in teaching materials, academic freedom for teachers, and issues beyond the First Amendment such as race, sex, the Holocaust, privacy, and patriotism.

The Bill of Rights and the Public Schools: Change and Challenge


Much of the research about the teaching of controversial issues focuses on court decisions that help practitioners understand their legal rights and responsibilities. This article gives a brief summary of cases in which students and teachers have encountered serious problems in teaching or expressing views about controversial issues. It describes in some detail how important court decisions such as Rafter v. Gannock and Pardeuci v. Rutland can help teachers decide what actions are appropriate for them in handling sensitive issues. It goes on to describe cases related to student freedoms by focusing on the implications of the Tinker v. Des Moines and Stanley v. Northeast Independent School District 462.