

ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURE

Personnel and Employee Relations

Political Neutrality and
Controversial Issues

PER# 37

Revised: April 2025

Background

Controversial issues are those topics that are publicly sensitive and upon which there is no consensus of values or beliefs. They include topics on which reasonable people may sincerely disagree. Opportunities to deal with these issues are an integral part of student learning in Alberta (Alberta Guide to Education, 2022).

Alberta Education's Teacher Quality Standard (2018) applies to a teacher's stance with respect to political neutrality and/or controversial issues in the classroom. Competency three stipulates that a teacher should build students' capacities for critical thinking and accessing, interpreting, and evaluating information from diverse sources. Competency four stipulates that a teacher does so by establishing, promoting, and sustaining an inclusive learning environment by fostering equality and respect. To enact these competencies, Alberta Education's Guide to Education (2019) indicates that when facing controversial issues that involve individuals' values and personal beliefs that may become topics of discussion online, in schools, and in classrooms, teachers must respond sensitively and with respect for multiple perspectives. Teachers, administrators, and school division staff are in positions of both authority and trust with students, and it is important they are politically neutral and respond to controversial issues as per this procedure.

The Alberta Guide to Education (2022) offers the following commentary on controversial issues:

Controversial issues are those topics that are publicly sensitive and upon which there is no consensus of values or beliefs. They include topics on which reasonable people may sincerely disagree. Opportunities to deal with these issues are an integral part of student learning in Alberta.

Studying controversial issues is important in preparing students to participate responsibly in a democratic and pluralistic society. Such study provides opportunities to develop the ability to think clearly, to reason logically, to open-mindedly and respectfully examine different points of view and to make sound judgements.

Teachers, students and others participating in studies or discussions of controversial issues need to exercise sensitivity to ensure that students and others are not ridiculed, embarrassed or intimidated for positions that they hold on controversial issues.

Discussing or studying controversial issues provides opportunities to

- *present alternative points of view, subject to the condition that information presented is not restricted by any federal or provincial law*
- *reflect the maturity, capabilities and educational needs of the students*
- *meet the requirements of provincially prescribed and approved courses and programs of study and education programs*

- *reflect the neighbourhood and community in which the school is located, as well as provincial, national and international contexts*
- *Controversial issues that have been anticipated by the teacher, and those that may arise incidentally during instruction, should be used by the teacher to promote critical inquiry and/or to teach thinking skills.*

The school plays a supportive role to parents in the areas of values and moral development and shall handle parental decisions in regard to controversial issues with respect and sensitivity.

Further to the Guide to Education's guidance, it is important to note that section 58.1 of the Education Act requires boards of schools to provide parents with notice where courses of study, educational programs or instructional materials, or instruction or exercises, including subject matter that deals primarily and explicitly with religion or human sexuality.

As well, the Code of Conduct for Teachers and Teacher Leaders, states, "In relation to students, the teacher or teacher leader shall not teach or lead in a manner that exploits the teacher's or teacher leader's relationship with students for ideological advantage, material advantage or other advantage". In this Regulation, "ideological advantage" means perspectives taught to students in a biased manner with the intent to take advantage of a student's uninformed or under-informed opinions, but it does not include programs of study established under the Act.

The following procedures outline proactive processes to ensure controversial issues are dealt with in adherence to the provisions of both the Guide to Education and the Education Act. They also outline a process for parents to request the review of a resource.

Procedures

1. Teachers should develop students' critical thinking skills by sensitively presenting accurate and balanced information on political issues and/or controversial issues, while demonstrating respect for multiple perspectives.
2. Teachers should represent political issues and/or controversial issues neutrally, avoid expressing personal opinions, and present competing perspectives and the values and beliefs upon which those perspectives are based.
3. To inspire critical thinking when discussing political issues and/or controversial issues, the information presented should:
 - 3.1 represent alternative points of view.
 - 3.2 reflect the requirements of the course as stated in the program of studies.
 - 3.3 reflect the community in which the school is located but not to the exclusion of provincial, national, and international contexts.
 - 3.4 consider the age and maturity of the students.
4. When students express strong opinions on political issues and/or controversial issues, teachers may endeavour to provide reasonable information that effectively represents both positions, while adhering to this administrative procedure.
5. The Catholic perspective is to be accurately, respectfully, and sensitively represented whenever applicable.