

## **INSTRUCTION**

### **Standard Instructional Program**

#### **Controversial Issues**

This regulation supersedes Regulation 3280.34.

#### **I. PURPOSE**

~~To provide guidelines for school-based and non-school-based administrators, teachers and students in dealing with controversial issues in ways that develop critical-thinking skills and reflect sensitivity to the emotions often engendered by such issues.~~ **To support relevant and inclusive learning experiences by clarifying the roles and expectations of students, teachers, school-based and central office administrators, and division leadership when engaging controversial issues.**

#### **II. SUMMARY OF CHANGES SINCE LAST PUBLICATION**

~~Reference to Regulation 4426 has been added for additional guidance and other references have been updated.~~ **This regulation has been subject to significant changes and should be reviewed in its entirety.**

#### **III. PHILOSOPHY**

The preparation for effective citizenship includes ~~the study of~~ **engagement with** issues that are controversial. ~~The study of~~ **Learning experiences related to** controversial issues shall be conducted in an **take place in an inclusive, culturally responsive, and safe** atmosphere in which students are encouraged to think critically, construct their own understanding, and question information and perspectives presented in resources, including those presented by the teacher. This policy applies to learning experiences planned in advance and/or those that arise during instruction in response to student interest. ~~which knowledge can be freely imparted and the critical thinking of students can be developed through research and classroom discussion, within the guidelines of the Program of Studies.~~

#### **IV. DEFINITION**

- A. **Controversial issues are questions pertaining to the past, present, or future for which credible sources of information lead to multiple interpretations or solutions. These interpretations or solutions may reflect differing values and/or inconclusive evidence. An issue is controversial when there are substantial differences of opinion about it on the local,**

~~national, or international level and when these differences of opinion are accompanied by intense feelings and strong emotions on the part of individuals or groups.~~

- B. ~~Whenever there is doubt about the controversial nature of any particular topic, teachers, students, or student groups should consult with the principal to determine the degree of sensitivity of the school community regarding the issue.~~ Classroom instruction around controversial issues should engage multiple perspectives and encourage critical thinking in a supportive atmosphere. Expressions of hate have no place in FCPS. Any form of expression intended to humiliate or incite hatred against a group or class of persons based upon their actual or perceived race, ethnicity, color, national origin, citizenship/immigration status, weight, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, language, faith, or ability shall not be tolerated in the classroom in the name of multiple perspectives.
- C. Effective preparation for teaching and learning about controversial issues requires critical reflection and perspective-taking. Teachers should consider the developmental appropriateness of the material for students. Teachers may seek professional learning resources aligned to the program of studies and thought partnership from stakeholders (e.g. school-based instructional leaders, collaborative team members, school-based administrators, central office staff, and/or students, families, and community members) to reflect and prepare.
- D. Messages or displays in the classroom or school building intended to affirm identities (e.g. race, culture, gender identity, sexuality, or religion), including representations of diverse identities in images or texts, are not considered to be controversial and thus are not subject to Regulation 3280. These messages or displays may be subject to Regulations 1425, 3005, 3007, 3011, and 4426, as appropriate.

## V. ROLE OF THE STUDENT

The role of the student is to engage responsibly as a learner and member of the classroom and school community.

When engaging controversial issues in the classroom, students should have opportunities to develop the following skills:

- A. To think independently by evaluating evidence and perspectives, checking for assumptions and biases, and questioning information and perspectives presented in resources, including those presented by the teacher.
- B. To engage respectfully with peers and teachers in accordance with the SR&R.

## VI. ROLE OF THE TEACHER

The role of the teacher is to facilitate relevant and inclusive learning experiences that reflect the FCPS learning model and One Fairfax policy's guidance to promote "a responsive, caring, and inclusive culture where all feel valued, supported, and hopeful."

Teachers should use the following guidelines in ~~dealing with controversial issues in the instructional program:~~ making decisions:

- A. ~~Address controversial issues as impartially and objectively as possible. Do not let personal biases intrude or allow personal beliefs to interfere with professional judgment.~~ Reflect on personal biases related to the controversial issue or topic, and identify

strategies to avoid undue influence on students' thinking.

- B. ~~Handle controversial issues in a manner relevant to the content of the course and appropriate to the knowledge and maturity of the students.~~ **Prioritize students' independent thinking in instructional design by:**
  - 1. taking on the role of facilitator.
  - 2. encouraging students to think critically, evaluate evidence and perspectives, check for assumptions and bias, and question information and perspectives presented in resources, including those presented by the teacher.
  - 3. avoiding the expectation that students reach an agreement about the controversial topic.
- C. ~~When there is doubt about the impact of a controversial issue in planned instruction, inform the principal about the situation and provide a brief outline of the instructional strategies that will be used to ensure objectivity, fairness, accuracy, and relevance to Program of Studies objectives.~~ **Foster a learning environment free from racism, antisemitism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other forms of hate and discrimination by:**
  - 1. establishing classroom expectations and procedures for engaging in discussions of controversial issues.
  - 2. responding to incidents of harm, including interactions among students during the learning experience.
  - 3. documenting and reporting incidents of harm.
- D. ~~Encourage critical thinking by offering multiple perspectives of the issue(s) under discussion, gathering information and evidence, considering implications and consequences of varying viewpoints, checking for assumptions, and using questions to guide ideas and clarify thinking.~~ **When making instructional decisions about framing the controversial topic, evaluate the appropriateness of perspectives, resources, and instructional modes through the lens of the FCPS Learning Model and the One Fairfax policy. When planning a learning experience about a controversial topic in advance, seek guidance and support from instructional leaders to ensure alignment.**
- E. ~~Do not expect or require that students reach an agreement.~~ **Handle controversial issues in a manner relevant to the content of the course and appropriate to the knowledge and maturity of the students.**
- F. ~~Be sensitive to students with feelings and emotions surrounding a controversial issue,~~ **Consider and be responsive toward students' emotions and developmental level, and contact school counselors, if appropriate.**
- G. When an unanticipated problem arises from a discussion of a controversial issue, consult with the principal **or designee** for appropriate follow-up **including documentation and reporting.**

## **VII. ROLE OF THE SCHOOL BASED ADMINISTRATOR**

The role of the school-based administrator is to provide teachers with support and

accountability for engaging controversial issues in ways that prioritize student-led learning and physically and psychologically safe, identity-affirming classroom communities in accordance with the FCPS Learning Model and the One Fairfax policy.

School-based administrators should use the following guidelines in making decisions:

- A. Take reasonable steps to prepare staff to plan and deliver instruction on Controversial Issues in accordance with division professional learning, policy and regulations
- B. Provide teachers with appropriate support for preparation & facilitation of meaningful learning about controversial issues by providing:
  - 1. Sufficient time to plan instruction.
  - 2. Guidance and accountability for instructional alignment with the FCPS Learning Model and the One Fairfax policy.
  - 3. Opportunities for school-based, division, and/or external professional learning about facilitating discussions of controversial issues, culturally responsive teaching, student-led learning, responding to instances of harm, and social emotional learning.
  - 4. Support and guidance for communication with families.
- C. Ensure staff accountability for instructional alignment with the FCPS Learning Model and the One Fairfax policy by:
  - 1. Communicating expectations about student-centered learning and culturally responsive teaching.
  - 2. Communicating expectations about responding to incidents of harm to include reporting, documentation and resolution.
  - 3. Addressing teacher and student actions and behaviors that may cause or contribute to harm.
- D. Align administrative decisions and instructional leadership with the FCPS Learning Model and the One Fairfax policy.

## **VIII. ROLE OF CENTRAL OFFICE ADMINISTRATOR**

The role of a central office administrator is to support school staff with resources aligned to the curriculum, FCPS Learning Model, and One Fairfax that support the facilitation of learning experiences related to controversial issues. Central office administrators are responsible for the following:

- A. Recommend and/or provide instructional resources aligned to the controversial issue
- B. Provide coaching and consulting to school based staff on working with the particular issue
- C. Facilitate professional learning about Culturally Responsive practices and pedagogies
- D. Contribute to development of messaging and communication.

## **IX. ROLE OF DIVISION LEADERSHIP**

The role of division leadership is to uphold the tenets of the policy, and support administrators with:

- A. Reinforcing learning environment expectations stated in the policy.
- B. Engaging with school leaders in responding to family and community in relation to particular learning experiences.
- C. Representing FCPS in related media inquiries.

## **X. SPEAKERS ON CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES**

- A. All invitations to guest speakers on controversial issues must be approved by the principal. The teacher, student, or student group desiring to invite a guest speaker must outline for the principal the following:
  - 1. The expected contribution of the speaker to Program of Studies objectives.
  - 2. Plans for preliminary and follow-up discussions and activities designed to help students put the speaker's view into context and perspective.
  - 3. Provisions for fair treatment of the views of the speaker and of differing opinions.
  - 4. The intended audience.
- B. Teachers should consult with the principal as to the advisability of informing parents about the controversial speaker.
- C. Students from other classes who have not been involved in preparatory activities should not attend the presentation. Any exception needs the principal's approval.
- D. When a guest speaker is scheduled for a presentation other than in a regular class setting, the principal will determine the appropriateness of the proposed forum for that presentation.
- E. Candidates for political office or their representatives may be scheduled as guest speakers in keeping with the above guidelines, and the candidate(s) opponent should be provided an opportunity to speak as well.

## **XI. DISTRIBUTION AND DISPLAY OF LITERATURE ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES**

- A. The principal shall determine the appropriate time, place, and manner for distribution and/or display of materials about controversial issues, including political literature. The current version of Regulation 1367 governs the distribution of fliers and other informational materials.
- B. Paid political advertisements may be placed in a school newspaper subject to approval of the principal **or designee**.
- C. Materials proposing specific violent tactics and/or disruption of government activities, including public education, are not allowed. Expression of student opinion may not be

used to present material that is obscene or slanderous, to defame character, or to advocate violation of federal, state, and local laws or official school policies, rules, and regulations.

See also the current versions of:

Regulation 1367, Distribution of Fliers or Other Informational Materials, Nonprofits Organizations' Access, and Procedures for Contests and Competitions Regulation 1370, Local School Organization and Administration Fund Raising Regulation 3005, Program and Supplemental Instructional Print Materials Identification, Evaluation, and Approval Policy 3203, Health Instruction Regulation 3204, Family Life Instruction Regulation 4426, Schools and Employee Political Activities  
[Regulation 1450 Nondiscrimination](#)

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