

Revised: April 2023

Background

As per Administrative Procedure PER #37, 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.

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. School administrators should request teachers review required reading lists (and other potentially controversial materials such as videos, movies, and case studies, etc.) on an annual basis and identify new literature and/or materials that may contain content or themes of a sensitive nature. Examples include, but are not limited to, content involving violence, racism, or human sexuality. It is not appropriate to use literature that is gratuitously focused on any of the aforementioned issues or any other sensitive issue. However, there is often a place for using literature or other resources with sensitive content under some general guidelines that teachers should adhere to under the principal's supervision and direction:
 - 1.1. The teacher has pre-read or previewed the selected resource and identified potential sensitive topics, themes or terminology.
 - 1.2. The students' age, maturity, and lived experience are considered.
 - 1.3. Communication (parent letter, course outline) is sent explaining the reason for using the resource and outlining what the sensitive issues are in advance.
 - 1.4. Parents are given the right to request their student opt out of lessons related to the resource, and have the teacher replicate the learning with another resource/activity for the student who is exempted.
 - 1.5. The teacher explicitly prepares to address the sensitive issue with students when using the resource and, preferably, in advance of using the resource.
 - 1.6. It should be noted that while a focus on sensitive issues can engage, raise awareness, and enlighten our students, there are many choices of literature and resources that nurture and expand the mind without controversy or risk.
2. Members of the school community have the right to formally challenge the use of instructional materials by demonstrating that the manner in which the resource is being used does not reflect the vision, mission and fundamental beliefs of the division. Instructional materials in our schools must support the Board's vision, mission, and fundamental beliefs.
3. Schools play a supportive role to parents in the areas of values and moral development and shall handle parental decisions regarding controversial issues with respect and sensitivity.
4. When formal challenges are received an ad hoc Controversial Materials Review Committee shall be established. The Director of Catholic Education and/or the Director of Learning shall recommend to the Superintendent the names of members for the Committee.
 - 4.1. The Committee should include the following:
 - 4.1.1. The Director of Catholic Education and/or the Director of Learning to act as chair and secretary.
 - 4.1.2. Four teachers from the division that correspond to the resource being challenged.
 - 4.1.3. Two or more parents or community members with background knowledge on the topic, themes or terminology being discussed.
 - 4.1.4. At least one administrator with grade level or topic expertise.
5. The Committee shall review and screen such resource as sent to it by the Superintendent or a principal, judging whether they are suitable for use. The Committee shall provide a rationale for its decision and make any recommendation it sees fit regarding the use of the resource.

6. When rendering a decision, the Committee shall either:
 - 6.1. judge each resource as fit or unfit (in whole or in part) for its intended use; or
 - 6.2. recommend the resource be used with advanced parent communication, informed consent, and/or explicit instruction related to proactively addressing the controversial issue in question.
7. The chair shall maintain an updated list of approved resource and circulate them as appropriate to principals and teachers.
8. The Committee shall also be responsible for dealing with public complaints about instructional resources or library books it has not previously approved. The Director of Catholic Education and/or Director of Learning will appoint an ad hoc parent member from the community where the complaint originates, for the meetings that deal with the specific complaint if it does not already have a representative on the committee.
9. Decisions and recommendations should be made by the Committee within one school calendar year from the date of original challenge submission.
10. Appeals of any decisions of the Committee shall be made to the Board of Trustees through the Superintendent. Decisions by the Board shall be final.

REFERENCES

- [Guide to Education: ECS to Grade 12](#)