

Purpose/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.

Books and literature play an important role in introducing students to contexts, cultures, values, and perspectives that may differ from or be reflective of those familiar to them. Students are to be provided with experience in selecting and organizing information in order to draw intelligent conclusions from it. At times some of the topics may appear to be sensitive to some communities and staff should be cognizant of this possibility.

In Rocky View Schools, students and teachers read, explore, and discuss rich and diverse literature and media both as a means to develop student literacy skills and to make connections between literature and areas of the Alberta Program of Studies. Such resources include those that are reflective of student contexts, communities, and experiences as well as those that introduce students to contexts and perspectives beyond those they are familiar with/readily accessible to them.

Procedures**1. Controversial Content**

- 1.1 The sensitivity of the community is to be considered by having teachers, administrators, students, and parents/guardians involved in identifying controversial issues.
- 1.2 Information regarding controversial matters is introduced to represent a variety of points of view, subject to the condition that information presented is not restricted by any federal or provincial law.
- 1.3 Information about controversial issues is presented in ways that reflect the maturity, capabilities and educational needs of the students.
- 1.4 Controversial issues which have been pre-planned by the teacher and those which may arise incidentally in the course of instruction are to be used by the teacher to promote critical inquiry and to teach students how to think rather than what to think.
- 1.5 School curricula is to play a supportive role to parents/guardians in the areas of values and moral development, and Principals shall handle parental decisions in regard to controversial issues with respect and sensitivity.
- 1.6 Parents/guardians must be provided with notice where courses of study, educational programs or instructional materials, or instruction or exercises, include subject matter that deals primarily and explicitly with religion and controversial issues. These requirements do not apply to incidental or indirect references to religion, religious themes or controversial issues.

For the course of study, educational program or instructional material, or instruction or exercise, to be considered to deal explicitly with religion, there must be no question that the subject matter is intended to be about religion. A religious interpretation of an otherwise non-religious subject matter would not be considered explicit. For example, the intent of including evolution in the science programs of study is to explore its foundation in scientific theory. Although there may be religious interpretations of the origin of life, the inclusion of evolution is not intended to be explicitly about religion.

- 1.7 Notice for the formation of, or membership in student-led organizations such as gay-straight alliances, diversity clubs, anti-racism clubs and anti-bullying clubs is NOT required.
- 1.8 Appendices B1 and B2 are available for reference to help facilitate the communication process around controversial content.
- 1.9 Parents/guardians who have concerns with teaching about religion and controversial issues may bring their concerns forward following the process referenced in AP 152 Dispute Resolution.

2. Considerations

The following are considerations for teachers as they identify literature or media resources for instruction, to ensure that the perspectives and safety of all stakeholders is accounted for before resources are introduced to students.

- 2.1 Identify the connections between chosen resources and the Alberta Program of Studies.
- 2.2 What formats of this resource are available for students to access?
- 2.3 Connect with the school's Learning Commons Facilitator for expertise on age-appropriateness of resource, and to learn about other connected resources.
- 2.4 What is the context for using this resource? How will emergent themes and discussions from this resource be supported? (Appendix A)
- 2.5 Consider whether it is necessary to inform parents/guardians about introducing this resource. If the resource or topic primarily and explicitly includes religion or controversial issues, parents/guardians must be informed and offered the opportunity for their child to have an alternate plan using the parent/guardian notice template. (Appendix B1)
- 2.6 Parents/guardians are to be informed in advance of the lesson using the parent/guardian notice template. (Appendix B1)
- 2.7 Parents/guardians may exempt their child from this topic by replying in writing to the principal to request an exemption. The exemption may also request alternate work, alternate placement or placement within the classroom without taking part. (Appendix B2)

- 2.8 If an exemption is requested, the teacher should make clear to the parent/guardian what the alternate plan is in advance of the lesson on the controversial topic.
- 2.9 Ensure that a contingency plan is in place in the event that students are not permitted to take part in reading or conversations about the resource. Talk with the school's Learning Commons facilitator about read-alikes, or alternative resources for these students.

Reference:

- Section 11, 18, 32, 33, 41, 52, 53, 58, 58.1, 58.2, 196, 197, 222 Education Act
- AP 152 Dispute Resolution
- Alberta Bill of Rights
- Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms
- Guide to Education ECS to Grade 12
- Appendix A Resources and Planning
- Appendix B1 Parent/Guardian Notice Template
- Appendix B2 Parent/Guardian Exemption Form Template

Appendix A

Recognizing diversity and promoting respect are attributes that are fostered within Rocky View Schools. A variety of resources can be incorporated into the teaching and learning environment in order to foster diversity and respect. Resources may include novels, articles, poems, videos, movies, songs, and lyrics.

The following actions may assist professionals when selecting classroom resources to ensure all stakeholders and perspectives are initially considered.

1. Curricular links.
2. Reflect the neighbourhood and community in which the school is located, as well as provincial, national and international contexts.
3. Resource details (ie. Novel, Article, Poem, Video, Movie, Song, Lyrics).
4. How does this resource recognize diversity and promote respect? What are key elements and/or teaching points?
5. Students require a safe space to explore, dialogue and digest all perspectives in order to promote critical thinking. Has a foundation been laid for this key step?
6. The contingency plan for students who are not engaging in resource:
 - Removal from instructional environment.
 - Non-participation while remaining in instructional environment.
7. Parent/Guardian Notice Letter and Exemption Form sent.

Appendix B1 Parent/Guardian Notice Template [Remove title]

[School letterhead]

[Date]

Dear Parents/Guardians,

In support of our curricular study of [course name], students will be reading/viewing/listening to [title of material] on [dates/times]. The specific Alberta Curriculum outcome(s) that are addressed within this resource include:

- [BULLET FORM]

Any teacher-facilitated discussions and activities will occur in a safe space for students to explore, dialogue and digest all perspectives in order to promote critical thinking. Topics may arise in this learning that may be considered controversial in nature, including:

- [BULLET FORM]

Upon careful consideration, you may choose to have your child excluded from utilizing this resource without academic penalty. As a result, your child:

- may be removed from the instructional environment.
- may remain in the instructional environment in a non-participatory manner.
- Other: [specify if applicable]

In order to exercise this option, you must sign and return the attached exemption form in Appendix B2 to [specify individual] on or before the date of the instruction indicated above. If this form is not returned before that date, your child will be included in the instruction above.

If you require clarification or have questions, please contact me at [email/phone number].

Sincerely,

[Teacher Name]

[Homeroom]

cc: [School Principal]

Appendix B2 Student Exemption Request Form Template [Remove title]

[Date]

To: Principal/Teacher of [identify school] with [identify School Board]

In response to the notice provided to me by [name of teacher] dated [date of notice] indicating that instructional material used in an educational program in which my child is enrolled, includes controversial subject matter, I, [parent/guardian name], hereby request that my child, [first and last name], be excluded from the instruction, exercise or the use of instructional material identified in the notice.

I request that my child (check relevant box):

☐ A. Leave the classroom or place where the instruction is taking place or where the instructional material is being used for the duration of that part of the instruction.

OR

☐ B. Remain in the classroom or place where the instruction is taking place without taking part in the instruction or use of instructional material.

I confirm that I am the parent/legal guardian of [child's first and last name] and have chosen to exercise my option to have my child excluded from the instruction on the dates indicated in the notice. I also confirm that it is my obligation to ensure that this form is returned to the school principal/teacher on or before the date of the instruction indicated in the notice.

The child to whom this exemption notice applies is: [First and Last name of child]

Teacher: [Teacher name]

Homeroom: [homeroom number]

Parent/Guardian Name (Print)

Parent/Guardian Signature

Date