

A Social Studies Teacher's Challenge: Thoughts from Experience

Anna Ochoa-Becker

A social studies teacher is called to the principal's office. The principal insists that the teacher cancel an assignment given to her senior government class.

The class had been studying the health reform issue when a student asked if they could enact a mock debate, where the class would act as the U.S. Senate. Her class agrees to this classroom activity; she points out that 60 percent of the class would be needed to stop a filibuster. She doesn't consider the fact that a large pharmaceutical employer in their community employs some of the parents of the students in the school. Should this teacher comply with the principal's demand to cancel?

In addition to obvious questions of school authority and teacher independence, an immediate question raised by this situation is whether a large employer should influence what the school and its teachers decide is a worthy topic for young citizens to study. Presumably, some students would be in favor of features like the "public option," taking a stand that the pharmaceutical firm vigorously opposes. How should this teacher have prepared for this classroom activity? Will it help or harm educational efforts for our young citizens to have this activity banned?

These questions illustrate the self-examination social studies teachers should undertake in regard to controversial issues. I pose them as a sincere advocate of the freedom to teach and the

freedom to learn. None of us have definitive answers that apply to all situations.

Some Guideposts

1. Find out if there is a school policy related to academic freedom. If there is, read it carefully. If there is not, work with your teacher organization to create a strong and professional one.
2. For your own understanding and to help guide the process of creating an academic freedom policy where none exists, send for a copy of the NCSS Position Statement "Academic Freedom and the Social Studies Teacher" (www.socialstudies.org/positions).
3. Tell your principal of your teaching plans anytime you are considering dealing with an issue about which the community has strong views. Your plans should include a powerful rationale (as compelling as you can make it!); the questions you are likely to ask; and what activities the students will engage in. Be sure you have this plan in writing. Remember, if your principal does not approve, you cannot count on his or her support if parental concern becomes vocal.

4. In this assignment, the teacher should review the websites and other sources that students are likely to read in preparation for the debate. This procedure will form a base for the questions the teacher may ask and will minimize any possible charges of irresponsibility.
5. Think through the sensitivity of the topic or issue to determine whether a note requesting parental permission is appropriate. Have ready an alternate assignment for those students whose parents disapprove, to do either in the school library or at a computer located outside your classroom when this activity takes place.
6. After your class has completed this activity, ask students for anonymous feedback on what they thought of the assignment. This feedback can be especially useful if parents choose to continue with their concerns or protests. Usually, students will appreciate classroom activities that show respect for their maturity and that are open and honest, rather than activities that try to conceal the truth.

These guideposts are not prescriptive; rather, they are important food for thought. They do not guarantee easy solutions. However, social studies teachers are preparing young people to hold

the “Office of Citizen” in a democracy, where transparency and openness are both valued and honored. Without teachers who are willing to stand up for democratic values, social studies loses its significance and the preparation of citizens becomes less authentic and certainly, less meaningful. 🌐

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Teacher Resources for Academic Freedom Issues

AAUP

American Association of University Professors; www.aaup.org
1133 Nineteenth Street, NW, Suite 200,
Washington, DC 20036
202-737-5900
Journal of Academic Freedom;
Academe; Amicus briefs

ABA

American Bar Association
www.abanet.org

ACLU

American Civil Liberties Union
www.aclu.org
125 Broad Street, 18th Floor, New York,
NY 10004
212-549-2500
Legal assistance; state and local offices

AHA

American Historical Association
www.historians.org

ALA

American Library Association;
www.ala.org
50 East Huron, Chicago, IL 60611
800-440-9374
Office for Intellectual Freedom,
Newsletter

Censorship Research Center
www.censorshipresearch.org

Digital Freedom Network
www.dfn.org

EFF

Electronic Frontier Foundation;
www.eff.org
454 Shotwell Street, San Francisco, CA
94110
415-436-9333
International; Protection for free
speech on Internet

The Freedom Forum

555 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW,
Washington, DC 20001
202-292-6100
Teaching religion in school, First
Amendment in school

Index on Censorship
www.indexonline.org

**International Freedom of
Expression Exchange**
www.ifex.org

NCAC

National Coalition Against Censorship
www.ncac.org
275 Seventh Avenue Suite 1504, New
York, NY 10001
212-807-6222
50 non-profit organizations joined,
including:

- American Association of University Women
- American Federation of Teachers
- National Education Association
- NCSS
- NCTE
- National Council of Churches

NCSS

National Council for the Social Studies
Academic Freedom Community
<http://communities.socialstudies.org/communities/academicfreedom>

NCTE

National Council of Teachers of English;
Anti-censorship Center offers support,
information, and documents

Peace Fire

<http://peacefire.org/info/about-peacefire.shtml>
Protection of student freedoms

Project Censored
www.projectcensored.org



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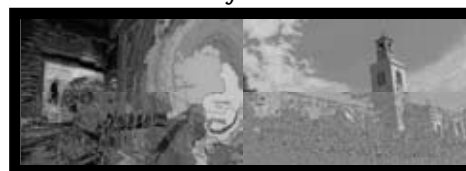
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