

GUIDELINES FOR TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

A Toolkit for Equity and Empowerment



ATLANTA
PUBLIC
SCHOOLS



Center for Equity
+ Social Justice



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OPENING CHARGE

from the Chief Equity & Social Justice Officer

As educators, we are charged with creating engaged citizens who uphold our democratic and pluralistic ideals. Through our classroom praxis, we also create citizens who understand our nation's motto of E Pluribus Unum (Out of Many, One) and who value liberty and justice for all. This responsibility requires us to take on three essential responsibilities, if we are to do our part in creating an engaged citizenry with fidelity.

This work, first, requires us to teach in ways that are responsive to the multi-cultural tapestry and that reflect the rich history of our nation. Educating our children about the rich diverse history that every group has contributed to our nation can be done without diminishing the very important contributions of others.

Second, we have inherited a history and a system that is complex and, at times, does not reflect the ideals of our democracy. Acknowledging and discussing this can be uncomfortable, difficult, and controversial. However, our work as educators requires that we lean into this and we shed light on the historical and current blind spots of our democracy.

Lastly, our children live in the same world that we do. No matter how hard we try, we cannot ignore their access, experience, and exposure to the complexities of the world around them. Thus, as educators, we have a responsibility to help our students constructively engage with difference, think objectively, and challenge personal biases as they navigate their place in the world. It is essential that students have opportunities to engage in and practice civil discourse by interacting with peers who hold opposing views. The ability to engage in civil discourse is the hallmark of democracy, and in the classroom, it should be done in a manner that allows students to formulate their own conclusions by building on and learning from the diverse perspectives of their peers.

As educators, we have a responsibility to cultivate engaged citizens who are poised to do their part in creating a more perfect union. Leaning into this responsibility is paramount

if we are to realize the vision of the founders of our nation. We also owe it to our students to prepare them for the world they will inherit. The world they will inherit is diverse and globally connected. By fulfilling the three responsibilities above, we enable our students to:

1. **Become critical thinkers who can empathize with people who are different from themselves,**
2. **Compete in the global society as individuals who are knowledgeable about the experiences and cultures of others, and**
3. **Actively respond to and engage with racism and other issues that challenge our democracy.**

Failure to accept these responsibilities threatens our democracy and ill prepares our students for the interconnected world they are inheriting. It also stifles the collective healing we need to move toward a more hopeful and promising future. Therefore, if we want to create a more perfect union, we must start in our classrooms, and we must teach to change the world.

This toolkit has been designed to support you in doing just that. It contains information, guidance, and resources to assist leaders and teachers in taking on the responsibilities I have outlined above. It also includes an outline of staff and student behavioral norms and expectations as we engage in this work, supports with lesson plans that align with our graduate portrait and social studies/civics curriculum, professional development tools for educators, a directory of internal and external supports for students, our Policy on Teaching Controversial Issues, and a list of additional supports for staff. This toolkit can also be found on the APS Center for Equity and Social Justice website and will be updated continuously.

In Service and Solidarity,

Dr. Tauheedah Baker-Jones
Dr. Tauheedah Baker-Jones

WHY FACILITATE DISCUSSIONS ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES?

When students share ideas, listen carefully to their peers, and practice being open to and respectful of other viewpoints, they are building knowledge and skills essential for effective participation in our democracy. According to Brown University's [Choices Program](#), these recent publications are helpful rationales for addressing controversial topics in the classroom.

- In a 2017 essay in the *New Yorker*, "[James Baldwin's Lesson for Teachers in a Time of Turmoil](#)," former high school teacher Clint Smith argues that teachers should help students explore the complexities of their world and consider how they might reshape it.
- In a 2018 edition of *Social Education*, Diana Hess introduces a series of articles, "[Teaching Controversial Issues: An Introduction](#)." The articles below provide teachers with resources and ideas for teaching about topics including immigration and race. (Teachers need to be members of the National Council for the Social Studies to access some of the other articles in the series.)
 - "[Rethinking Immigration as a Controversy](#)"
 - "[A Pathway to Racial Literacy: Using the LETS ACT Framework to Teach Controversial Issues](#)"
 - "[Teaching Controversial Issues in a Time of Polarization](#)"
 - "[Can We Do This Every Day? Engaging Students in Controversial Issues through Role-Play](#)"

To this end, Atlanta Public Schools supports teaching controversial issues as an equitable strategic priority that disrupts systemic barriers that have harmed the academic, social, and emotional well-being of all students.

TALKING POINTS & DEFINITIONS

- The main goal of the district’s equity work is to engage educators, community voices, caregivers, students, and families to build trust and solve complex problems together.
- We will uplift student identities and cultures to spark positive whole-child development and steer decision-making at all levels of the education system.
- Together, we must rethink how we use data to consistently and equitably allocate our people, time, and money to ensure every child gets the resources and support they need to succeed.
- When all of our students feel seen, valued, and supported, our entire city will succeed.

Defining Equity

- The Atlanta Board of Education recognizes equity means the quality or ideal of being just and fair, regardless of economic, social, cultural, and human differences among and between persons.
- Equity goes deeper than equality to address the root causes of disparity and recognizes the reality that each child is different.
- Students who require special needs, gifted education, or free and reduced lunch each require different resources. Equity ensures they all get what they need.

Defining Equity Lens

- The process of paying disciplined attention to historically marginalized populations (race, ethnicity, ability, etc.) while analyzing problems, looking for solutions, and defining success. An equity lens critiques a “color blind” or “equality of need” approach, arguing that these lenses perpetuate systems of disadvantage and prevent structural racism from being acknowledged. Application of an equity lens helps to illuminate disparate outcomes, patterns of disadvantage, and root cause.

What is the Goal of Equity?

- The aim of equity is to provide students with additional and differentiated resources based on their educational needs.

Defining Social Justice

- Social justice is achieved within a school district when the predictive link between demography and outcomes is broken.

Defining Equitable & Socially Just Instruction

- Equitable instruction is learning that is grounded in students’ experiences because it is engaging, culturally and linguistically affirming, meaningful, and grade level appropriate.
- Being socially just in our instructional practices requires that students have a voice in the curriculum through supplementation that mitigates race, class, ability, language, gender, and other boundaries that often hinders access to the curriculum.

Defining Equitable and Socially Just Stakeholder Engagement

- Equitable stakeholder engagement is being intentional and inclusive in our leadership practices. This means that our stakeholders (teachers, school leaders, students, and families) have a voice in the problem-solving and decision-making process.

EXPECTATIONS

BOARD POLICY

APS BOARD POLICY MANUAL

[Equity \(BAC\) 2019](#)

[Language Access \(IEG\) 2019](#)

[Trauma Informed Practices \(JGBA\) 2021](#)

[Restorative Practices \(JGBB\) 2021](#)

[Equal Education Opportunities \(JAA\) 2014; Adopted 2012](#)

[Controversial Issues \(IKB\) 2020; Adopted 1980](#)

DISTRICT GUIDANCE

[JUMPSTART 2021 with Dr. Herring](#)

[2020-2025 APS STRATEGIC PLAN](#)

EQUITY DISPOSITIONS

[EQUITY LEADERSHIP DISPOSITIONS](#)

[EQUITY TEACHER DISPOSITIONS](#)

BOARD POLICY IKB

Controversial Issues

The Atlanta Board of Education supports and encourages an environment that fosters independent and critical thought. It is frequently necessary for students to study and teachers to teach issues which may be considered controversial. When considering such issues, students and teachers will have the following rights:

- 1. To study and teach any controversial issue that has political, economic, or social significance in an age- and developmentally- appropriate manner.*
- 2. To have free access to all relevant information, including the materials that circulate freely in the community.*
- 3. To study under competent instruction in an atmosphere of freedom from actions based on bias and prejudice. To provide competent instruction, using sound professional judgment designed to support standards-based instruction, in an atmosphere free from actions based on bias and prejudice.*
- 4. To form and express opinions on controversial issues without fear of retaliation.*

Last Revised: 8/3/2020

First Adopted: 12/8/1980



GUIDELINES FOR FACILITATING

Conversations about Controversial Issues in the Classroom

1. BE REFLECTIVE AND REFLEXIVE

Be reflective and reflexive on Equity Dispositions before facilitating age-appropriate instruction and classroom conversations with students. It is important that teachers are upfront and honest with themselves about their perspectives on the matter so they can 1) check them and 2) teach the issue in an objective, judgment-free way. Teachers will supply students with reputable, research-based, and age-appropriate materials that present diverse perspectives in a non-judgmental and factual way. Consider asking yourself these questions during times of reflection and reflexivity (adapted from the Leadership Academy's Leadership Dispositions):

- What is your personal vision and belief system around this issue?
- How are your experiences different from or similar to the students in this discussion?
- Are the decisions you are making as a teacher reflecting the needs and priorities of the students? If so, how? If not, how do you need to change your decision-making process (lesson plans) to better reflect their needs?
- Consider a time when you identified and confronted practices or interactions that were based on race or culturally biased assumptions. How did you manage that situation? What was the outcome?

Teachers should also confront biases when they arise in the classroom as well as maintain a norm of a judgment-free zone when discussing their perspectives. In other words, confronting bias in the classroom is NOT allowing students to use a person's opinions and perspectives as a means of personal attack or in a demeaning way.

RESOURCE

HELPFUL TOOLS

APS Equity Dispositions

Book: *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life: Life-Changing Tools for Healthy Relationships* by Marshall Rosenberg and Deepak Chopra

Book: *Unconscious Bias in Schools: A Developmental Approach to Exploring Race and Racism* by Tracey Benson and Sarah Fiarman

[Harvard Implicit Bias Tests](#)

2. EXPLICITLY STATE PURPOSE IN SYLLABUS AND LESSON PLANS

“The Atlanta Board of Education supports and encourages an environment that fosters independent and critical thought. It is frequently necessary for students to study and teachers to teach issues which may be considered controversial”.

Be sure that your classroom syllabus and lesson plan explicitly tells students and families that there will be times when students will be engaging in discussions and learning about issues that may be considered controversial. Controversial issues may include (but not limited to) political, social, cultural, religious, race, gender, gender expression, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, etc. issues or affairs. This is a necessary pedagogy that “fosters independent and critical thought”. Atlanta Public Schools supports teaching controversial issues as an equitable strategic priority to disrupt systemic barriers that have harmed the academic, social, and emotional well-being of all students.

The ABOE has also demonstrated that it takes seriously the importance of equipping our students with knowledge of challenging and sometimes controversial issues. The ABOE recognizes that our children live in the same world that we do, and we cannot ignore their access, experience, and exposure to the complexities of the world around them; and it is their collective belief that in order to build a strong future, our schools must work to shape engaged citizens who are prepared for diverse environments, who are knowledgeable about, and can empathize with, the lived experiences and cultures of others, and who are able to challenge their personal biases as they navigate their place in our nation and the global society.

RESOURCE	
HELPFUL TOOLS	APS Board Policies
	District Guidance
	APS Equity Dispositions

3. ENCOURAGE CRITICAL THINKING, HONEST OBJECTIVITY, AND PRODUCTIVE DISCUSSIONS

BRAVE DISCUSSION FRAMEWORK

To achieve equity and social justice, we must embrace life-long learning. We must also commit to unlearning the patterns, ways of working, and thinking that uphold systemic inequities. We must also recognize that social justice is both a process and a goal. The process requires us to remain reflective, critical, and intentional in our words and actions. The goal is to be BRAVE and create BRAVE spaces.

This tool and protocol will support us in developing BRAVE spaces in complement with our Equity Dispositions. A BRAVE space is one that calls us to:

- Build** coalitions across lines of difference. Engage diverse voices and viewpoints. Build your equity lens by paying disciplined attention to the experiences and perspectives of historically marginalized populations.
- Reserve** judgment, recognize that your truth may be different from others, challenge your thinking, ideas and assumptions, and ask questions about intent.
- Acknowledge** the impact that statements and/or actions may have on others. Lean into the discomfort this work creates, trust the process, and accept non-closure.
- Value** vulnerability, empathize with the diverse experience and perspective of others, and extend the grace to grow.
- Enthusiastically** champion equity, celebrate success, and continuously reflect on opportunities for growth.

Being BRAVE encourages and allows us to engage in critical dialogue. Maintaining a BRAVE space requires that each person is self-reflective, self-accountable, willing to learn, and open to new understandings.

The following is a protocol that will allow you to engage in difficult, courageous or controversial conversations in a way that produces meaningful dialogue and that maintains the dignity and humanity of all those involved.

BRAVE DISCUSSION NORMS

Be a positive and polite participant

- Be present, prepared, & engaged
- Remember the One Mic Rule: One person speaks at a time.
- Respect all perspectives. Differences of opinion are a fundamental part of the process.
- Reserve judgment. Remember that thoughts, ideas, and opinions should not be used as a motive for personal attack

Be an active listener

- Sit in discomfort. Allow yourself to be comfortable with discomfort, to sit through difficult feelings sometimes without feeling the need to rail against them.
- Listen first to understand and be curious about intention. Ask clarifying questions to better understand. Ask others for definitions, evidence, examples, and reasons.
- Stay focused on the topic & purpose of the discussion
- Practice equity of voice. Remember the Rule of Two: Allow two others to chime in before jumping back in.

Be a reflective learner

- Ground statements in evidence or explain rationale.
- Challenge your thinking, assumptions, and perceived ideas. Practice being open-minded and reserve the right to change your mind.
- Expect and accept Non-Closure. Sit with uncertainty and do not rush to quick conclusions or solutions.
- Speak your truth. Meaning be honest about your thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Ground your comments in “I” statements.

BRAVE CENTERING PROTOCOL

Reflection questions to ask yourself during an engagement or discussion that requires you to be **BRAVE**.

This protocol should be used in concert with the [BRAVE Discussion Framework](#) and the [BRAVE Discussion Norms](#).

Step 1:

- Is there an aspect(s) of the *BRAVE Discussion Norms* that is challenging you at this moment?

Allow yourself the space to acknowledge your disposition and emotions at the moment.

Step 2:

- Is there an aspect of the BRAVE Discussion Framework that can counter the challenge(s) you are feeling at this moment?

Or,

- Is there an aspect of the BRAVE Reflection Framework that resonates with you at this moment?

Select a key phrase from the BRAVE Discussion Framework and repeat it twice. The first time is to acknowledge your disposition. The second time is to ground yourself.

Use this affirmation to center yourself and anchor the comments you will share moving forward in this affirmation.

Step 3:

Repeat Step 1 and Step 2 as needed throughout the discussion

Feel free to center on as many aspects of the BRAVE Framework as needed.

RESOURCE

HELPFUL TOOLS

APS Equity Dispositions

4. GIVE STUDENTS PROBLEM SOLVING OPPORTUNITIES

“Children will be motivated to learn because their hearts, hands, and heads are engaged in improving their daily lives”
~ Dr. Grace Lee Boggs. Give students opportunities to practice solving their own problems and social issues for change personally and collectively.



(Recommendations were adapted from Theory into Practice Strategies: Inclusive Practices for Managing Controversial Issues)

DIRECTORY OF SUPPORTS FOR TEACHERS

(Note: These supports are NOT intended to be exhaustive.)

Center for Equity + Social Justice Office of Equitable Learning Environments

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[Center for Equity & Social Justice](#)

[Social Emotional Learning](#) District SEL training and support

[Be Well at APS](#) District wellness support for APS Staff

DIRECTORY OF SUPPORTS FOR TEACHERS

(Note: These supports are NOT intended to be exhaustive.)

Race

[Affirming Black Lives in School: Teachers, Administrators, Students Resources](#)

[AMAZEworks Black Lives Matter Lesson](#)

[George Floyd, Racism and Law Enforcement \(in English and en Español\) – Anti-Defamation League Table Talk Guide](#)

[My Scaffolded Anti-Racist Resources](#)

[Racism and Intolerance \(Children in Our World Series\) by Louise A. Spilsbury, A book to help children understand the way others struggle with these issues and become empowered to make a difference.](#)

[Reflecting on George Floyd’s Death and Police Violence Towards Black Americans Guide](#)

[Resources to Help Educators, Adults Respond to Racism, Violence and Trauma webpage](#)

[Stamped from the Beginning by Ibram X. Kendi \(for older teens and adults\) and Stamped \(For Kids\) by Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Reynolds. A book to help in the relearning/learning of the history of racism in order to make the connection to the present-day.](#)

[Teaching for Black Lives](#)

[Things That Make White People Uncomfortable by Dave Zirin. A sports book for young people who want to make a difference, a memoir, and a book as hilarious and engaging as it is illuminating.](#)

[This Book is Anti-Racist by Tiffany Jewell, illustrated by Aurélia Durand. Written for teens and a helpful companion to having discussions around racism. It includes sections on identity, how to make sense of history, taking action, and working in solidarity.](#)

[University of Minnesota Community Resource: Recommendations and Resources for Supporting Students Before, During, and After the Chauvin Trial](#)

[Zinn Education Project](#)

LGBTQIA+

[Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network \(GLSEN\)](#)

[GA Safe Schools Coalition](#)

[Gay-Straight-Alliance \(GSA\) Network](#)

[Human Rights Campaign Resources](#)

[PFLAG Atlanta](#)

Social Emotional Learning and Communications

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

[How to Talk with Kids About Racism and Racial Violence](#)

[Navigating Difficult Conversations with Children and Youth on Race, Racism, And Discrimination, Ages 11 and up](#)

[Navigating Difficult Conversations with Children and Youth on Race, Racism, And Discrimination, Ages 3-12](#)

[RESOURCES FOR TALKING ABOUT RACE, RACISM AND RACIALIZED VIOLENCE WITH KIDS](#)

[Uplifting Youth Through Healthy Communication About Race](#)

Social Justice

[Anti-Defamation League \(ADL\) www.adl.org No Place for Hate](#)

[Fostering Civil Discourse: A Guide for Classroom Conversations](#)

[Helping Youth after Community Trauma: Tips for Educators \(NCTSN\)](#)

[Learning for Justice](#)

[Let's Talk: Facilitating Critical Conversations with Students](#)

[Respective Talk Video](#)

[Social Justice Standards: The Learning for Justice Anti-Racist Framework](#)

[The Danger of a Single Story](#)

Suggested Readings

Race	Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom by Lisa Delpit
	Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire
	We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom by Bettina Love
	Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria by Beverly Daniel Tatum
	Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom by bell hooks
Social Justice	Culturally Responsive Teaching & the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students by Zaretta Hammond
	Storytelling for Social Justice: Connecting Narrative and the Arts in Antiracist Teaching by Lee Anne Bell
Social Emotional Learning & Communications	Crucial Conversations Tools for Talking When Stakes are High by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler
	Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts by Brené Brown
	Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life: Life-Changing Tools for Healthy Relationships by Marshall Rosenberg and Deepak Chopra
	The Restorative Practices Handbook for Teachers, Disciplinarians, and Administrators by Bob Costello, Joshua Wachtel, and Ted Wachtel
	Unconscious Bias in Schools: A Developmental Approach to Exploring Race and Racism by Tracey Benson and Sarah Fiarman