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A Classroom Teacher's Guide to Academic Freedom

by
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Our schools must accept the existence of a continuing threat to academic freedom and prepare for attacks by establishing local academic freedom policies. We believe that such policies and Specific Procedures to back them up can be an effective safeguard against unwarranted censorship.

Several recent surveys have indicated that although many local districts encourage their teachers "to cover" current civil issues that may be controversial (civil rights, open housing, abortion laws, poverty, amnesty, presidential pardons), very few have a written set of guidelines to support, guide, and encourage the teachers and pupils in this most vital but sensitive effort.

In establishing air academic freedom policy, we suggest that it deal with five basic areas: instructional methodology, curriculum materials, controversial issues, outside speakers, and student publications. In developing procedures related to these five areas, a number of questions should be investigated.

1. What are parents' rights? Can they demand (and have their demand granted) that their child not be required to read certain material, hear a given speaker, or study a particular topic?
2. Does the teacher have the responsibility to keep the administration informed concerning topics, materials, methods, etc., that might be challenged?
3. Does the pupil have the right to hold his or her own view even if it differs from that of the teacher and yet retain the respect of and fair treatment from the teacher and administration?
4. Does the teacher have the right and/or responsibility to see that all sides of an issue are adequately and fairly presented? Does this mean that he or she must, himself or herself, present an unpopular view if it can be brought out in no other way?
5. What limits, if any, should be placed upon student publications authorized or unauthorized by the school? Does having a "captive audience" make any

- difference? Should a school paper be able to deal with any issue covered by the public media and press of that area?
6. Are the age, ability, and maturity levels of the pupils important factors to be considered by teachers in selecting topics, materials, methods, speakers, etc.; and if so, what guidelines are there to help the teacher make such decisions?
 7. Do the parents and administrators have the responsibility to check immediately with the teacher before accepting and/or spreading complaints? Should there be a special procedure to be followed?
 8. Do teachers have the right to deal with any topic or only those within their field of specialty and academic preparation?
 9. Does the pupil have the right to be free from indoctrination of any specific religious and/or political belief while in the public schools? If so, what responsibilities does this imply for teachers?

A controversial issues policy statement should be jointly formulated by teachers, parents, administrators, board members, and pupils and should accomplish the following:

1. State the Board's philosophy on freedom to teach and to learn.
2. Establish the rights and responsibilities of all parties.
3. Provide guidelines and safeguards for the study of controversial issues, selection of materials, use of off-campus speakers, and any other elements that are deemed to be potentially controversial.
4. Establish procedures that can be used to evaluate complaints against teachers or materials.

Such a clearly formulated policy enables every teacher, pupil, administrator, and parent to know in advance the responsibilities that are theirs and what to expect if they fail to live up to them. Each also knows what rights he or she has and that he or she is protected, while exercising those rights.

The authors have provided the questionnaires on page 223 as guides for teachers who would examine the health of academic freedom in their schools.

The three sample questionnaires should be viewed as representative of the kinds of instruments that can be designed to measure academic freedom. We would point out that the validity of these sample questions has not been established, and we would ask educators to adapt the questionnaires to their own peculiar situation. While we do not advocate the acceptance of imposed limitations, we do argue that identification at problem areas is the first step toward problem resolution. Our guiding principle is that the teacher bears special right "to select for classroom study controversial issues related to the curriculum and appropriate to the maturity, and intellectual and emotional capacities of the student."

Questionnaire One: Curriculum Decision-Making

Sample Responses

Almost Always 4 points

On Occasion 2 points

Almost Never 0 points

Please respond to the following by using the above numerical point value.

To what extent do teachers play the predominant role in making decisions concerning

- o Textbook selection
- o Curriculum design
- o Instructional methodology
- o Curriculum materials
- o Library acquisitions (books, periodicals, magazines)
- o Outside speakers
- o Selection of controversial issues
- o Inservice improvement
- o School policy development?

We suggest that by assigning appropriate numerical values to given responses, an educator might begin to evaluate his school district for academic freedom. Thus a score of 26 -- 36 would indicate a fairly high regard for academic freedom; a score of 14 -- 24 would indicate that help is needed; a score of 0 -- 12 would seem to indicate desperate situation.

Questionnaire Two: Administrative Evaluation of Teachers

**Directions to Questionnaire One apply
except that A.A. = 0, O.O. = 2, and A.N. = 4.**

To what extent is administrative evaluation carried out on the basis of the teacher's

- o Political participation
- o Racial or ethnic backgrounds
- o Religious beliefs and ideas
- o Social beliefs and ideas
- o Economic beliefs and ideas
- o Discussion of the virtues and faults of the school or school system?

In this survey, a score of 18-24 would indicate major problem; 10-16 a questionable situations and 0-8 an excellent score.

Questionnaire Three: Academic Freedom Indicators

Questionnaire number three of this survey can be administered separately or in combination with one and two. It can be administered to community, central staff, and/or faculty.

Sample Responses

Strongly Agree S.A.

Agree A.

No Opinion N.O.

Disagree D.

Strongly Disagree S. D.

Please respond to the following by using S.A., A., N.O., D., S.D.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following:

- o Tomorrow's citizens and leaders should have wide exposure to a discussion of controversial issues.
- o A teacher's personal, religious, political, and economic beliefs should not come under examination when his professional competence is being evaluated,
- o Classroom discussion should be permitted on points of view which are contrary to community standards.
- o The Board of Education should have official form letters available to members of the community who might wish to complain about aspects of the curriculum
- o The Board of Education should have an official policy on academic freedom responses, that clearly states the right of a student to learn and a teacher to teach.
- o Parents should have the right to exempt their children from reading a book, but they should not have the right to exclude any or all curriculum materials'
- o In his private capacity, the teacher should be able to hold and express publicly his views on religious, social, and political matters.

- o One of the central tasks of education is to develop the student's ability to question established views.
- o The classroom should be open to outside speakers whose special competence the teacher may want to utilize in exploring a given issue.
- o In preparing for effective citizenship, students should learn the techniques and skills of lawful democratic dissent.
- o Students should have the opportunity to discuss controversial issues with persons having opposing points of view.
- o Teachers should promote the fair representation of differing points of view on all issues
- o Teachers should be able to discuss with students political, social, or economic philosophies that are in opposition to those of the United States.
- o Teachers should be permitted to select textbooks and supplemental materials free of administrative and community restraint.
- o instructional methodology should be free from community restraints.
- o Students should learn to consider the possible merits of differing viewpoints.
- o Students should be free to reach any conclusions upon an issue that fit the facts as they understand them, without any limitation other than that imposed by intellectual honesty
- o A diversity of views is essential to a democracy.
- o Citizens of the community should have the right to examine and criticize school materials.
- o Every citizen should have the right to criticize or lawfully oppose any government policy or official without penalty or restraint.

In tabulating the above responses, assign a point value of 5 for S.A., 4 for A., 3 for N.O., 2 for D., and 1 for S.D.

A score of 82-100 would seem to indicate high regard for academic freedom; 62-80, some hazy conception; 22-40, obvious disregard for the concept; and 0-20, a strongly authoritarian disregard.

Before initiating the task of developing a set of formal procedures, it is also recommended that an assessment of the current status of academic freedom be undertaken in the areas of curriculum decision making, teacher evaluation, and community attitudes toward the issues involved.

As policies and procedures are developed, the data gathered by such a pre-assessment serve as a relatively objective baseline and help participants on the various committees to measure their proposals against these results.

It may be that the above is an expression of the ideal; given present realities, the authors would offer some suggestions. The education community in general and the social studies department in particular should seek to establish community support as a normal,

ongoing process. Many communities have former teachers, college professors, and others who strongly support academic freedom. These people should be identified and their knowledge, expertise, and advice solicited regarding curricular decisions within the school and the social studies department.

The social studies teacher should communicate his or her objectives to the community. It is our experience that if controversial issues are dealt with, it will be impossible to limit these issues to the four walls of the classroom. The community will be aware of classroom discussions. We would argue that interested persons should have access to as much information as possible.

If controversial issues are to be studied, then a rationale for their study ought to exist. Why should the class study this issue at this time? What are the objectives of this unit? What behavioral changes might one expect as an outcome of this unit? We would argue that a written rationale ought to exist. We know of no better way to inject fresh air into a social studies department than by having the members re-examine their purposes for teaching. Once a printed rationale exists, it should be placed in department files and be made available to the public.

Sometimes, in spite of all of our precaution, the censor will still come. When this happens, a strategy should be formulated in advance to combat the attack.

Checklist: Combating the Attack

Phase I-When the complaint is made.

- o Consider the individual's complaint legitimate.
- o Talk with him or her politely and fairly.
- o Discuss his or her objection with other members of the department.
- o Respond to and resolve the objection as soon as possible.
- o Stand firm in your demands that specific charges be submitted in writing and signed.
- o Call upon community members for assistance.
- o Seek impartial analysis of the problem.
- o Be sure that any questionable material has been thoroughly read and studied by those who question it.
- o Invite the opposition to visit the classroom setting.
- o Avoid loss of temper and unbecoming behavior.

Phase II If the complainant persists:

- o Request public hearings by the board of education.
- o Publicize the time and location of these meetings.
- o Determine an announced order of business.
- o Take minutes of the meeting
- o Invite the press.
- o Reassure both the administration and board of education of your knowledge, competence, and sincerity.
- o Request professional aid from:
 - o Local educational association
 - o NCSS Defense Fund, NCTE, ALA, AHA, AAUP
 - o NEA, DuShane Fund
 - o AFT
 - o ACLU
 - o American Bar Association
 - o Local colleges and universities
 - o State Board of Education

If academic freedom is to be protected, then procedural guarantees are necessary. Ultimately, principles of academic freedom must be established within codes of law. Long years of litigation will be necessary to obtain this objective. It is equally important that a community of professionals charged with developing standards and regulating professional conduct be created. Such a group made up of such organizations as NCTE, NCSS, and ASCD can develop and seek to implement standards with a vigor that should be persuasive.

Conclusion: Freedom with limitations

Should there be limits placed on academic freedom? Are there ideas too dangerous to be protected? The important question is: Who is wise enough to differentiate "safe" from "dangerous" ideas? Those who would place nonprofessional limits either do not value academic freedom or do not understand it. Freedom with nonprofessional limits implies bondage-bondage of the teacher to another person. Consequently, the seemingly innocuous statement, "I believe in freedom with limits," is somewhat inane. John Stuart Mill spoke to these questions over one hundred years ago.

Strange it is, that men should admit the validity of 'arguments for free discussion, but object to their being "pushed to an extreme," not seeing that unless the reasons are good for an extreme case, they are not good for any case. Strange that they should imagine that they are not assuming infallibility, when they acknowledge that there should be free discussion on all subjects which can possibly be doubtful, but think that some particular

principle or doctrine should be forbidden to be questioned because it is so certain, that is, because they are certain that it is certain. To call any proposition certain while there is any one who would deny its certainty if permitted, is to assume that we ourselves, and those who agree with us, are the judges of certainty and judges without hearing the other side.

We must remember that freedom within limits can be stretched to cover almost any conceivable degree of liberty or it may be used to justify tyrannical restraint.

The profession must increase its involvement on the issue of academic freedom. Teachers, themselves, must become more assertive in their role as curriculum designers. If teachers are to function as professionals, they must assume greater responsibility for helping in the formulation and implementation of school policy.