

# Freedom to Teach, Freedom to Learn

## **WHERE WE CAME FROM**

Teachers used to enjoy a great deal of autonomy in the classroom, allowing student discussion to wander where it would, always with an awareness of age-readiness and within the constraints of preparing students for their final exams. Teachers were free to seize upon student interest and allow digressions in the classroom that supported the larger goal of learning the whole subject, not merely bits and pieces that would be tested, according to the interests of students.

We are now in a moment of tremendous upheaval; along with the texts and books being perceived as harmful, teachers are now being portrayed as threats to children, being called “groomers” who seek to “indoctrinate” and “coerce” children.

If we are to uphold intellectual freedom, free expression, and cultural representation, we must resist this anti-democratic rhetoric.

Under the influence of national groups alleging teacher malfeasance without a shred of evidence, some in our community became convinced that we needed to expand Policy 321, which originally covered merely political actions while on the job, to cover “neutrality,” “bias,” and even decor in the classroom. The policy led to precisely the consequences its opponents predicted when a librarian posted a quotation from Holocaust survivor Elie Weisel and was accused of violating the policy.

## **WHERE WE ARE NOW**

Policy 321 leads to misunderstanding, accusation, fear, and self-censorship. The implication appears to be that teachers and others must guess what anyone at any time might dislike and avoid that. This would seem to guarantee a boring and spiritless classroom.

Enforcement of the policy rests on someone—a student? another staff member?—snitching on a teacher. Then it comes down to the teacher’s word against the student’s, lacking all context. Thus the policy creates an adversarial relationship between teacher and student where there must be collaboration and mutual respect for learning to occur.

## **Advocates for Inclusive Education**

Position Paper: Freedom to Teach & Learn, June 2023

### **WE BELIEVE**

- Teachers must create a sense of trust in their classrooms. As one teacher used to say, "I am everyone's teacher." This is a given. Sometimes, teachers need help with this, especially those who are new to the classroom.
- But "neutrality" and "balance" are far less important than curiosity, mutual respect, and good listening skills. By presenting students with a bland and sanitized view of the world scrubbed of all controversy, we fail to prepare them to ask critical questions of ideas they will surely encounter in the future. Instead of removing all potential stumbling blocks of differing opinions, we should encourage teachers to present a wide variety of views to their students.
- We further believe that teachers intend to teach, not to brainwash, their students. They want to encourage kids to learn and that often means digressing from the curriculum to allow students to pose questions, to explore hypotheticals, and to voice their own views. All of this must be encouraged, not threatened.
- We know that teachers will sometimes make mistakes. They are human beings. When they do, the best consequence is for administrators to speak to the teacher, to coach and encourage and foster a climate of self-reflection, so that teachers can flourish in their important work.
- The goal to encourage vibrant classrooms, not to appear to threaten those who allow the free exchange of ideas.

### **WHERE WE WANT TO GO**

- Repeal the current Policy 321, go back to the previous iteration, and allow teachers plenty of time to collaborate and participate in workshops that help them learn how to achieve balance and inclusiveness in their classrooms.
- Resist anti-democratic censorship movements.
- Defend intellectual freedom, free expression, and cultural representation.