

The Case for Removing Policy 2331

By Matt Briggs

Policy 2331 (Controversial Issues - Teaching of) of teaching both sides of the controversy hinders teachers (who are experts their respective fields) in organizing and developing course curriculum within the framework of a Standards-Based Education. The policy distracts students from learning their material. Furthermore, the policy politicizes the curriculum. I ask that he superintended remove the policy and associated procedure so that the school district's expert teachers can attend to the business of educating students without being interfered with by groups with an external agenda.

The Federal Way School district hires instructors who bring to their positions years of teacher training. They are required to maintain currency in both teaching practices and their domains of expertise. Our community expects our teachers to understand changes in pedagogical practice. We also expect our teachers to keep abreast of changes in their field as knowledge advances. Each field has developed its own methods of advancing knowledge through argument, conflict, and the testing of new ideas. The tenets of various fields are not a matter of opinion, but belong the body of knowledge of these fields, even if the facts are in flux. In science, before an

idea becomes widely held it has already passed through an extensive period of evaluation. In the language arts, grammar and usage is determined by the experts who draft style manuals or decide to include new words in the dictionary. The curriculum of high school students is not necessarily the cutting edge of any given discipline, but rather serves as the foundation for students entering the work force, becoming participating members of our democracy, and entering as college. Our community expects our educators to teach our students current, relevant information in each domain.

The policy of teaching both sides of the controversy allows organizations who are neither trained educators or even particularly knowledgeable in a particular discipline to set the agenda of individual teacher's curriculum.

Controversy itself is a result of the conflict between paradigms. Advances in knowledge and technology often result in paradigm shifts. For instance, as the geography of the known world expanded in the Renaissance the sense of the earth as round and a particular size. The shape and size of the earth was fixed according to the received knowledge of the time. New knowledge challenged the previous paradigm. While these controversies exist in the realm of public discourse, they do not have a place in the classroom. When learning about the geography of a world as measured by satellite and photographed from the lunar surface, learning the geographic paradigm of the Middle Ages is of little relevance. It is clear that allowing Flat Earthers equal time in the curriculum would waste instructor and student time.

On the surface, "both sides" seems fair. The concept seems to support the advance of knowledge and critical thinking. And this

would be true if were dealing with students already conversant in critical thinking and fluent in the current facts of their respective disciplines. Secondary students are in school to learn critical thinking skills and the facts of disciplines such as English composition, science, and math. Our community expects them to graduate with fluency in these areas; without knowing the first side it is pre-mature to think it is helpful to learn "both sides."

Even the selection of a counter-fact is at issue. For every fact there is a counter-fact. Even something that seems as unquestioned as the existence of the "to be" verb in English Grammar has a counter-argument. There is a movement called E-Prime that seeks to remove the "to be" verb from use. To follow the district policy, if the to be verb were to become controversial, then language arts teachers would be obliged to teach both the "to be" verb and also how to write (and think) without using the "to be" verb. Every fact could be thus be made to have at least two sides (sometimes three or four or more sides). Imagine then where every fact becomes controversial, and our instructors would be teaching "fact/anti-facts" and would have no time in performing their job, which is to educate world-class students with current, accurate knowledge armed to succeed in the contemporary world.

Because of the vague definition of controversy, topics that are challenged as controversial are ones for which there is a political or religious axe to grind. It is unlikely that an organized effort from proponents of E-Prime would seek to introduce both sides of the "to be" verb controversy. Instead typically challenged are issues for which this broad community support for their controversy such as global warming, evolution, and the age of the planet. Prominent creationist, Kent Hovind claimed in a speech

in reported by Pat Jarrett, in the Daily Kent Stater, April 7, 2006, "Evolution is the foundation for communism, nazism, socialism, Marxism and those who want a one-world government." When a widely accepted scientific concept such as global warming is counter-balanced by the claims of someone such as Kent Hovind, students are presented with a wildly distorted view that is neither accurate, balanced, or useful in terms of learning current knowledge and skills. While the claims of Hovind may seem wild and not really relevant to the Federal Way School District, in fact, the district received a challenge to the teaching of global warming in the winter of 2007 when a district parent, Frosty Hardison, was reported by Robert McClure and Lisa Stiffler in the Seattle PI on January 10th, 2007, as saying, "The information that's being presented is a very cockeyed view of what the truth is. ... The Bible says that in the end times everything will burn up, but that perspective isn't in the DVD."

Federal Way School district Policy 2331 serves to politicize school curriculum. The policy and procedure strips away the responsibility of the instructor to set the curriculum and teach their subject. As a school district that embraces Standards-Based Education, the district asserts that teachers "know which skills and knowledge are the highest priority, instead of guessing which standards to teach from among the hundreds established by the state." The policy undercuts a Standards-Based Education. Furthermore, the policy does not support the mission of educating students fluent and knowledgeable in key subjects. For these reasons, it should be removed from the Federal Way Policy and Procedure Manual.

Matt Briggs is the parent of a Federal Way School District student. He is the author of six works of fiction. His novel, *Shoot the Buffalo*, won an American Book Award in 2006, and was a finalist for the Washington State Book Award. His nonfiction and fiction has appeared widely in print and on the Internet.