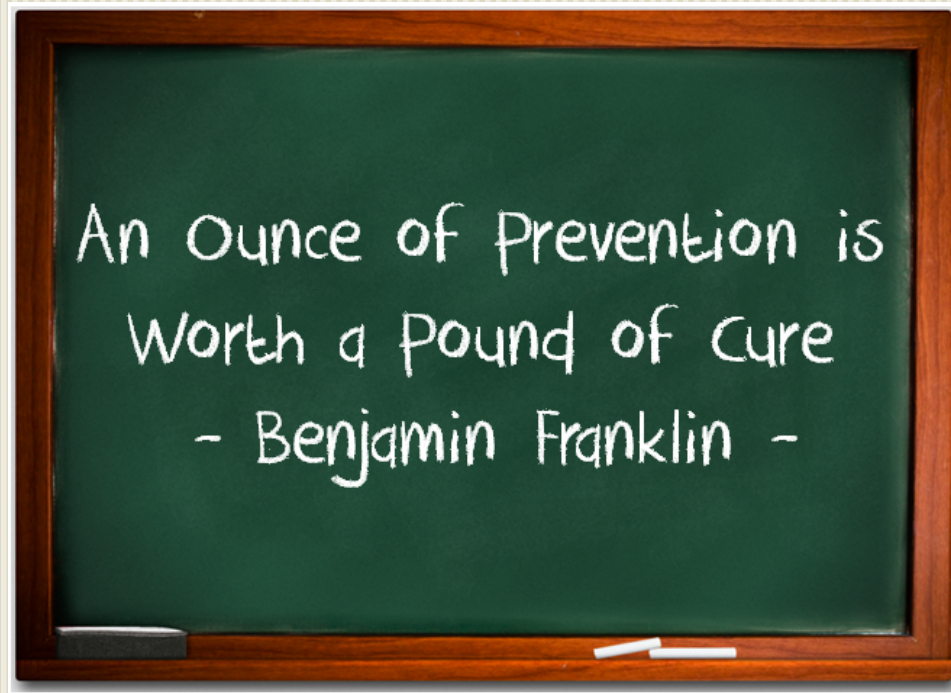


# An Ounce of Prevention



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# CIRCLE's 2012 national teacher survey

- only 38% of social studies teachers think they would get strong support from their district to teach about an election
- only 28% think parents would strongly support them

# An Ounce of Prevention: preparing for controversy

- Controversial Issues
- School policies
- Your community
- Communicating with your school administrators
- Classroom climate
- Sharing your opinions

# What is a controversial public/political issue?

- An unresolved question of public policy that sparks significant disagreement
- Involves strong personal beliefs
- Involves conflicts of values that resist compromise
- Has no right or wrong answers
- Examples?
- Abortion, Gun control, immigration, national security, minimum wage

# Why should we teach controversial issues?

- Democratic self-government requires constant discussions and decisions about controversial issues.
- Silence about controversial issues makes it more likely that bad policies will prevail.
- There is an intrinsic and crucial connection between the discussion of controversial political issues and the health of democracy.
- You cannot have democracy without discussing controversial issues.
- Therefore, we need to teach our students how to “do” democracy by practicing the skills of discussing controversial issues in the classroom.

From: Diana Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom*, 2009.

# Research shows

## Discussing current controversial public issues:

- Is authentic and relevant
- Enhances sense of political efficacy
- Improves critical thinking skills
- Increases students comfort with conflict that exists in the world outside of classroom
- Develops political tolerance
- Motivates students
- Results in students gaining greater content knowledge

From: Diana Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom*, 2009.

# NJ State Social Studies Standards

- 6.1.8.A.3.g Evaluate the impact of the Constitution and Bill of Rights on current day issues.
- 6.1.12.A.14.d Evaluate the impact of the Constitution and Bill of Rights on current day issues.
- 6.1.12.A.14.d Analyze the conflicting ideologies and actions of political parties regarding spending priorities, the role of government in the economy and social reform.
- 6.1.12.B.14.a Determine the impact of recent immigration...on demographic, social, economic and political issues

# School policies on teaching controversial issues

- In addition to hiring and evaluating the school superintendent, school boards work primarily through policies, which set guidelines for principals, teachers, parents and students.
- School policies are written, public records
- Your school should have a policy that:
  - supports and encourages the teaching of controversial issues
  - sets guidelines for teaching controversial issues, including a process for dealing with challenges



# Have you looked at your school policy on teaching controversial issues?

- Look at a few policies
  - [http://www.westfieldnj12.org/files/\\_xUCXW\\_/b2db7598e06d4dc73745a49013852ec4/2240 Controversial Issues Approved 2.19.13.pdf](http://www.westfieldnj12.org/files/_xUCXW_/b2db7598e06d4dc73745a49013852ec4/2240%20Controversial%20Issues%20Approved%202.19.13.pdf)
  - <http://boe.nutleyschools.org/sites/default/files/policies/2240.pdf>
  - <http://www.rih.org/page.cfm?p=1935&pback=1925>
  - [http://www.edison.k12.nj.us/cms/lib2/NJ01001623/Centricity/Domain/36/2240 %20-%20Controversial%20Issues.pdf](http://www.edison.k12.nj.us/cms/lib2/NJ01001623/Centricity/Domain/36/2240%20-%20Controversial%20Issues.pdf)
- What key words do you see?
  - Balanced, unprejudiced, no indoctrination, fair, objective
- Look at your school policy
- Advocate for one if none exists
- Use these as models

# Talk with your administrators

- Plan in advance
- Tell your supervisor and/or principal that you plan to teach about the upcoming election
- Refer your supervisor to your school policy about Teaching Controversial Issues, #2240
- Refer to the civic mission of schools
- Note the state social studies standards
- Explain the value
- If you anticipate controversy send a note and/or talk with parents/parents organizations

# Do you know your community?

- Who lives in the community where you teach?
- Google your town and you will get the demographics
- Example: Piscataway, Millburn and New Brunswick
  - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piscataway,\\_New\\_Jersey#Demographics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piscataway,_New_Jersey#Demographics)
  - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millburn,\\_New\\_Jersey#Demographics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millburn,_New_Jersey#Demographics)
  - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_Brunswick,\\_New\\_Jersey#Demographics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Brunswick,_New_Jersey#Demographics)
- Look at the local newspaper or online media
- How does this help you?

# Know what your objectives are

- Recognize that the ultimate purpose of social studies—in fact—education period—is to create informed, engaged citizens.
- The classroom activities should encourage critical thinking
- You are not trying to convince students of any particular point of view
- Preview any materials, especially visual media which may be very powerful or provocative
- Be aware of the sources of information

# Create a classroom climate supportive of teaching controversial issues

- Model a respectful environment for discussing controversial issues
- Build tolerance for opposing viewpoints
- Examine historical controversies as practice for looking at current controversies
- Provide adequate background and context for current controversial issues
- Acknowledge the legitimacy of the controversy, i.e., that there is more than one response to the issue
- Carefully consider how students are grouped for cooperative work
- Have students practice active listening skills
- Establish a process and rules of adequate evidence or support so that the discussion is based on facts rather than simply opinions
- Provide closure (which may be acknowledging the difficulty of the issue)

# Sources

- Today information is readily available from multiple media sources
- Most sources are not balanced
- Sources must be assessed
- Sources of positions by candidates:
  - Media—does it have a political perspective?
  - Parties—clearly have a political perspective!
  - Organizations—sometimes “grassroots” organizations are funded by big money
  - Party Platforms
  - Candidates position papers

# Facts vs. Opinions



- "Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence."— John Adams
- "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts."— Daniel Patrick Moynihan
- Insist that students base their views on facts
- Check facts at <http://www.politifact.com/>

# To disclose or not to disclose?

- Do you usually disclose your view on a controversial issue to your student?
- Should you?
- Research by Diana Hess in *Controversy in the Classroom* revealed that:
  - Students usually can figure out a teacher's position on a controversial topic and they often try to guess
  - The teacher revealing his or her position does not have as huge an impact on student opinions as we might think, but may have an impact on the nature of the classroom discussion.
- What if a student explicitly asks for your view about the election?



# To disclose or not to disclose?

- If you prefer not to disclose your view, explicitly state that and explain why
- If you decide to disclose your own views, do it carefully and only after the students have expressed their views
- “Natural disclosures” are in response to a direct question by a student
- Disclosure should be accompanied by a disclaimer
  - This is my view because...
  - Other people may have different views
  - Voting is done in secret so that no one can be bullied for his or her views
- More aggressive (unrequested, inserted) disclosures may be seen as preachy, or may stop the discussion.

# Questions? Comments?

