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California Three Rs

Rights, Responsibility, and Respect

*A Project of the California County Superintendents Educational
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Using a 3Rs Approach to Head Off Challenges as Schools Begin Implementing Common Core ELA Standards

Margaret Hill, Director California Three Rs Project

During the last several of years I have been hearing a consistent theme from teachers in my professional development sessions across California. They are experiencing more and more challenges to content and literature reading selections from parents. Many of these same teachers are not aware of any policies in their district or school related to the selection of instructional materials or library books, with the exception of the rule that they may not show R-rated films.

In addition, recently there have been a number of professional articles from curriculum specialists training teachers for implementing Core ELA Standards who have experienced criticism of some informational text and literature choices. These educational leaders are being challenged for moving away from the more "sanitized" basal reading series to include learning from more complex literature and content specific texts suggested in the Common Core Standards reform.

Since the stated goal of the Common Core Standards is to enhance college and career readiness, reading beyond the textbook has become mandatory.

To build a foundation for college and career readiness, students must read widely and deeply from among a broad range of high-quality, increasingly challenging literary and informational texts. Through extensive reading of stories, dramas, poems, and myths from diverse cultures and different time periods, students gain literary and cultural knowledge as well as familiarity with various text structures and elements.

Common Core ELA-Literacy Anchor Standards

In the new reform, the range of materials for classroom use is has been broadened. History-social science is now fully included in the ELA Common Core Standards, especially from grades 6 to 12. The range of literacy has been enhanced to ensure that "the curriculum is intentionally and coherently structured to develop rich content knowledge within and across grades. " But higher level and more complex literature often has more adult themes. Since it is to represent a wide cultural spectrum, selections may not have been edited to remove references to nonmainstream cultural or language norms. In addition, history instruction involves the inclusion of controversial issues and position-taking from various perspectives. Studying controversial issues often involves the analysis of primary sources, including those from people whose positions may be loathsome to some. Lastly, learning to select, evaluate and utilize internet resources is also included in the new standards. This process within the free wheeling nature of the internet opens its own can of worms for many parents and educators.

It is time to revisit and/or develop comprehensive district policies related to the

selection and use of materials to satisfy the Common Core ELA and other new legal requirements across content areas. By using the 3Rs principles of rights, responsibilities, and respect as the foundation or ground rules of the policy formation process, educational leaders and the communities that they serve will be able to build comprehensive policies that will remain useful long after the current issues are resolved and new ones appear.

First Amendment scholar Dr. Charles Haynes, who has dealt with countless controversies based on clashing worldviews in the public schools, offers the following ideas for creating policies for managing controversies over instructional materials.

Set the Ground Rules

The first step in establishing a policy on the instructional review process is to set some ground rules. In this case, there are two parts. First, the school leader needs to fully explain the Three Rs, and help the group decide what they will look like in practice and how they will be used to shape discussion.

Rights

Religious liberty, or freedom of conscience, is a basic and inalienable right founded on the inviolable dignity of each person.

Responsibilities

Freedom of conscience is not only a universal right, but it depends upon a universal responsibility to respect that right for others.

Respect

Debate and disagreement are natural elements of democracy. Yet, if we are to live with our differences, not only what we debate, but how we debate are critical. A strong democracy and strong schools rest on a commitment by people of differing convictions to treat one another with civility.

Second, the school leaders need to explain the nature of the Common Core ELA Standards, their origin, and why they are important for students and their future. As part of this, they should specifically emphasize what the changes will mean in classroom instructional practice and (probably) in the assessment of students and schools.

Include All Stakeholders

In selecting the policy development committee, include a broad range of perspectives. Committee members should represent the community, parents, administrators and teachers. These people in turn need to represent many student age levels and schools, a range of ethnicities, races, and lifestyles, and a wide spectrum of conservatives to liberals in social philosophy.

Listen to all Sides

The most important thing in bringing this widely diverse group to a productive outcome is to:

- ensure all have a voice
- listen respectfully, while acknowledging the validity of different perspectives
- put aside labels and stereotyping
- remember that all participants want what is best for their children or the students that they teach

Work for Comprehensive Policies

School districts would be well advised to make their policy effort comprehensive when it relates to issues of religion or conscience and the schools. Start with areas where agreement is most likely to be achieved. Then build on the trust that has been created to tackle the more controversial issues. For example, after agreement is reached about the need for 21st century students to have the knowledge, skills and dispositions to think critically, solve problems, and work with others in a diverse cultural setting and global economy, it's easier to deal with establishing parameters for selecting the specific resources that would serve that end.

It is always better to find some way to allow people from each perspective to feel they have been able to achieve agreement on something of importance to them. For example, the schools may not use materials that promote religious ideas or practices, but neither can they use resources that denigrate or are hostile to

religion. Schools can read materials related to and teach about beliefs and their impact on society. But, they cannot practice or simulate rituals or ceremonies even if the majority would like to do so.

Be Proactive

Before going into the process of reviewing or developing new policy, it is best to anticipate the areas and issues in the curriculum that will likely draw concern. It's better to anticipate and head off confrontation and conflict rather than try to contain and ameliorate it after it has occurred. This approach means that those leading the process need to be experienced and clear on the law related to religion and the schools and how it has been applied in the courts in California. They need also to be familiar with what Common Core Standards require. This preparation will allow the process to be anticipatory in finding solutions and setting the tone for agreement.

Commit to Civil Debate

All members of the policy development committee must be clear about and committed to maintain a civil discussion and conflict resolution process. If things begin to get a little heated, stop and reaffirm the fact that disagreement in a democratic process is a given but that name-calling and personal attacks by or among policy the development committee members will destroy the conflict resolution process and will be stopped immediately.

Follow Through with Communication to All Stakeholders

Periodic interim reports to the school district community and personnel will reassure everyone that progress is being made and that discussions about their issues are being held. After the policies are developed, all of these constituencies will be expecting the school leaders and teachers to follow through. All staff must be aware of the policies and how it is to be implemented and the process to be followed in handling challenges.

As all educators know, conflicts are always disruptive to schools and communities. It takes courage to begin a process that everyone knows has the potential to cause controversy simply because it represents a change in the status quo. The alternative is an even greater level of disruption when angry parents or teachers who have been kept in the dark about curriculum changes storm the board meeting or file a lawsuit. The above process has succeeded in countless places and has great potential to work for your school and district.

For further information, review *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion in Public Schools* by Charles C. Haynes and Oliver Thomas, First Amendment Center, 2007, chapter 3. Free for download at <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/publications> (scroll to "Religion")

Religious Liberty Historical Model Behind the March for Civil Rights

March 9, 2013

California Council for the Social Studies

This year's CCSS Annual Conference **Social Studies on the March** celebrates the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, the Children's March in Birmingham, and other critical events of 1963 relating to the Civil Rights Movement. At the session announced above, Margaret Hill, CA 3Rs Project Director and Katherine Rand, CA 3Rs Project Teacher Leader will present the historical story of those who fought for religious liberty in the 17th using methods that served as models to fight oppression in the later Civil Rights Movement.

Not only will this conference feature speakers who actually participated in the Civil Rights Movement but also offers a special 8-hour strand for English and History teacher teams on how to implement Common Core ELA State Standards across the curriculum. Register at http://www.ccss.org/2013_conference.

Common Ground Resources:

Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools by Charles Haynes and Oliver Thomas, Esq. First Amendment Center, 2007. This book has guidelines on how to handle a wide range of issues related to religious liberty and public schools. Download free at <http://www.firstamendment.org/publications> , scroll to "religion."

The Religious Freedom Education Project at the Newseum <http://www.religiousfreedomeducation.org> is a program at the First Amendment Center focusing on religious liberty in public life.

CA 3Rs Project Website <http://ca3rsproject.org> This site has resources for teachers and administrators, documents published by the CA 3Rs Project, calendars of religious holidays, etc.

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