

Academic Freedom and the Social Studies Teacher

1. Academic Freedom for Teachers and Students

Academic freedom for social studies teachers includes the right and responsibility to study, investigate, present, interpret, discuss, and debate relevant facts, issues, and ideas in fields of the teacher's professional competence. Academic freedom for students in social studies courses provides the right to study, question, interpret, and discuss relevant facts, ideas, and issues under consideration in those courses. These freedoms imply no limitations, within the guidelines of the subject area.

2. Rationale for Academic Freedom in Social Studies

The democratic process involves the ability to freely discuss ideas and values that exist in our society and in other countries. Without this ability in our secondary and higher level institutions, our democracy would disappear. That is why it is so important to protect the academic rights of teachers and students.

An educated population is essential in order to maintain a democratic society. This includes the ability to discuss or investigate diverse and often controversial issues. Wisdom with which to make choices can come only if the essential freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and of teaching are available and defended. These basic freedoms protect the society and individuals in their right to hear, to read, to discuss, and to reach judgments according to individual conscience and

evidence. Without the possession and the exercise of these rights, legitimate self-government is impossible. Well-informed citizens are more capable of making sound choices and carrying out their citizenship duties.

In order to carry out this crucial mission, education must impart the skills needed for intelligent study and orderly consideration of societal issues. Students need to learn how to study controversial issues by gathering and organizing facts, evaluating information and sources, discriminating between facts and opinions, and discussing different viewpoints in order to be able to think and make clear, informed decisions.

Social studies and its component subjects of history, politics, economics, geography, anthropology, sociology, psychology and other social sciences are the central school subjects in the development of civic knowledge and skills. The content of these social subjects involves controversial issues, and thus, the necessity of academic freedom for social studies teachers and students.

3. The Study of Controversial Issues

Controversial issues must be studied in the classroom without the assumption that they are settled in advance or there is only one "right" answer in matters of dispute. The social studies teacher must approach such issues in a spirit of critical inquiry exposing the students to a variety of ideas, even if they are different from their own.

The study of controversial issues should develop the following skills and attitudes:

1. The ability to study relevant social problems of the past or present and make informed decisions or conclusions;
2. The ability to use critical reasoning and evidence-based evaluation in the study and analysis of significant issues and ideas; this includes development of skills of critical analysis and evaluation in considering ideas, opinions, information, and sources of information;
3. The recognition that differing viewpoints are valuable and normal as a part of social discourse;
4. The recognition that reasonable compromise is often an important part of the democratic decision-making process.

4. Responding to Academic Freedom Challenges

Implicit in the basic idea of academic freedom is the continuous need to support and defend it by such actions as educating the public, the government (both local and federal), parents, school board members, and new teachers about its importance. Strong support for academic freedom has its best chance for protection in school contexts wherein

all members of the community are informed about the purposes, operation, objectives, and procedures for insuring academic freedom in the schools. Teachers must establish and utilize clear lines of communication with their students, the community and the media, in the event that challenges to academic freedom arise.

Academic freedom, like the freedoms of speech, press, and religion, is not absolute. However, it is recognized by the NCSS as a fundamental element in teaching excellence and in the maintenance of our culture and government.

In recent years, the movement for standards and high stakes testing has impinged on issues of academic freedom. In some schools, the movement for accountability has led to the imposition of unhealthy pressure to cover content in a superficial manner, serving as a constraint on meaningful teaching and learning. While the goal of high standards for student achievement is worthy, we must remain aware that powerful and creative teaching requires a strong measure of academic freedom for teachers to serve as thoughtful curricular-instructional decision makers.

An infringement of academic freedom is a serious matter. School districts and teacher associations should have written policies and procedures that protect academic freedom, while providing an avenue for complaints and criticisms of the teacher or school practices. These policies and procedures must insure fairness, and due process, and provide for peer teacher determination of teacher conduct. When an issue of academic freedom arises, securing legal or competent extra-legal advice is an essential step for any teacher to guard against a possibly unfair resolution of the problem. The PTA, local law schools, local and state colleges and universities, and the State Departments of Education are among the sources of information and support.

If local support is ineffective or

inadequate, assistance from national sources should be sought. There are many national organizations that are interested in preserving academic freedom as well as in improving the quality of schools. In addition to National Council for the Social Studies, they include:

- American Association of School Librarians
- American Association of University Professors
- American Bar Association
- American Civil Liberties Union
- American Federation of Teachers
- American Historical Association
- American Library Association
- National Council of Teachers of English
- National Education Association

These suggestions are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to indicate that a person under attack is not alone and that there are sources available from which assistance may be obtained.

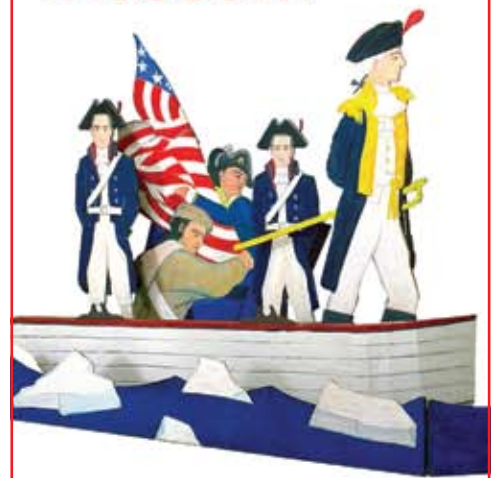
Academic freedom is neither easily defined nor can it always be protected.

Documents such as this, while valuable as a guideline, do not presume to constitute sufficient guarantees. Only continuing concern, commitment, and action by teachers, administrators, school boards, professional organizations, students, and the citizenry, can insure the reality of academic freedom in a changing society. 🌐

This position statement, which was prepared by the NCSS Academic Freedom Committee, was approved by the NCSS Board of Directors in May 2007.

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Alex Katz, *Washington Crossing the Delaware: American Flag, Boat, and Soldiers (detail)*, 1961. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David K. Anderson, Martha Jackson Memorial Collection