



Teaching Truth

Tips for Teachers in a Tumultuous Time

August 11, 2021

Educators are experts on making sure our students learn honesty about who we are, integrity in how we treat others, and courage to do what's right. Recent broad-ranging attacks on how we teach and what we teach has created confusion about how we can safely continue teaching accurate and updated curricula to help our students understand our past and present in order to create a better future.

You are protected in teaching the curriculum.

We are instructed by our school districts to teach prescribed curricula and cannot be disciplined for teaching these. We know that by presenting factual information, we give our students the opportunity to draw their own conclusions and engage deeply with the material. Educators have broad leeway to choose how each curriculum is implemented in the classroom, whether that's by choosing which books to read or by selecting which units on which to spend more or less time.

Some union contracts go farther to ensure academic freedom.

Read your local union contract to determine whether you have additional protections for speech in the classroom. If you're not sure, talk with your building rep.

Note that the First Amendment does not extend into the classroom.

When instructing students, legally speaking, we are considered to be speaking on behalf of the district. That means, unless otherwise stated in our union contracts, we have to refrain from taking political positions or espousing personal beliefs. That includes in our speech, classroom decorations, and displays.

Safety comes first.

For our students and ourselves, the first consideration is safety. We must create an environment where all students feel safe and we must demand that our employers protect our personal safety. *If you feel your students or yourself threatened by activists, report this to your administration immediately, and to the police as well if necessary.*

What about my classroom Black Lives Matter flag?

Stating that Black Lives Matter is stating the truth – that we lift up our Black students and work to ensure they have equitable access to education and resources. Some non-Black people have harmfully and wrongly assumed that Black Lives Matter is a political statement or suggests unconditional support for an organization and its actions. WEA maintains that Black Lives Matter is appropriate, and indeed needed, in our schools.

What about curricula like the 1619 Project and Black Lives Matter at School?

Students need to learn our shared stories of confronting injustice to build a more perfect union, and students deserve better than the outdated, inaccurate, redlined accounts of the past history curriculum. While working within our districts' curriculum parameters, each of us bring our expertise to determine the best way to make history accurate, holistic, and engaging for all students, whether Black, brown, or white. Educators should not teach curricula that are explicitly prohibited by their administration.

Can I do an Indigenous land acknowledgement?

Since 2005, Washington state has required PK-12 schools to teach Tribally-developed curriculum with a focus on learning more about Tribal sovereignty. A land acknowledgement can be an engaging way for students to recognize our history, however it is not a required part of the *Since Time Immemorial* curriculum. Educators can opt to do land acknowledgements unless told otherwise by their administration.

I have been told by my administration I cannot teach Critical Race Theory. How does that impact me?

Critical Race Theory is taught in universities and law schools, but at the PK-12 and community college levels we teach age-appropriate lessons that help our students understand and communicate across differences and portray a holistic and accurate picture of our nation's history.

What do I do if a parent has a problem with something I am teaching?

Corporate interests that seek to undermine public education are inciting paranoia among families, causing some to jump to conclusions about our materials and teaching. If a calm conversation with the family does not diffuse the situation, seek backup from your administration. If you fear you will be disciplined due to parental complaints about your curriculum, contact your building rep.

How are union members protected in these situations?

Together in our union, we have additional protections. Some local union contracts include additional language about academic freedom that protect educators. Local union contracts also include a fair grievance and discipline procedure that ensure educators' concerns are heard. If you may need protection, reach out to your building rep.