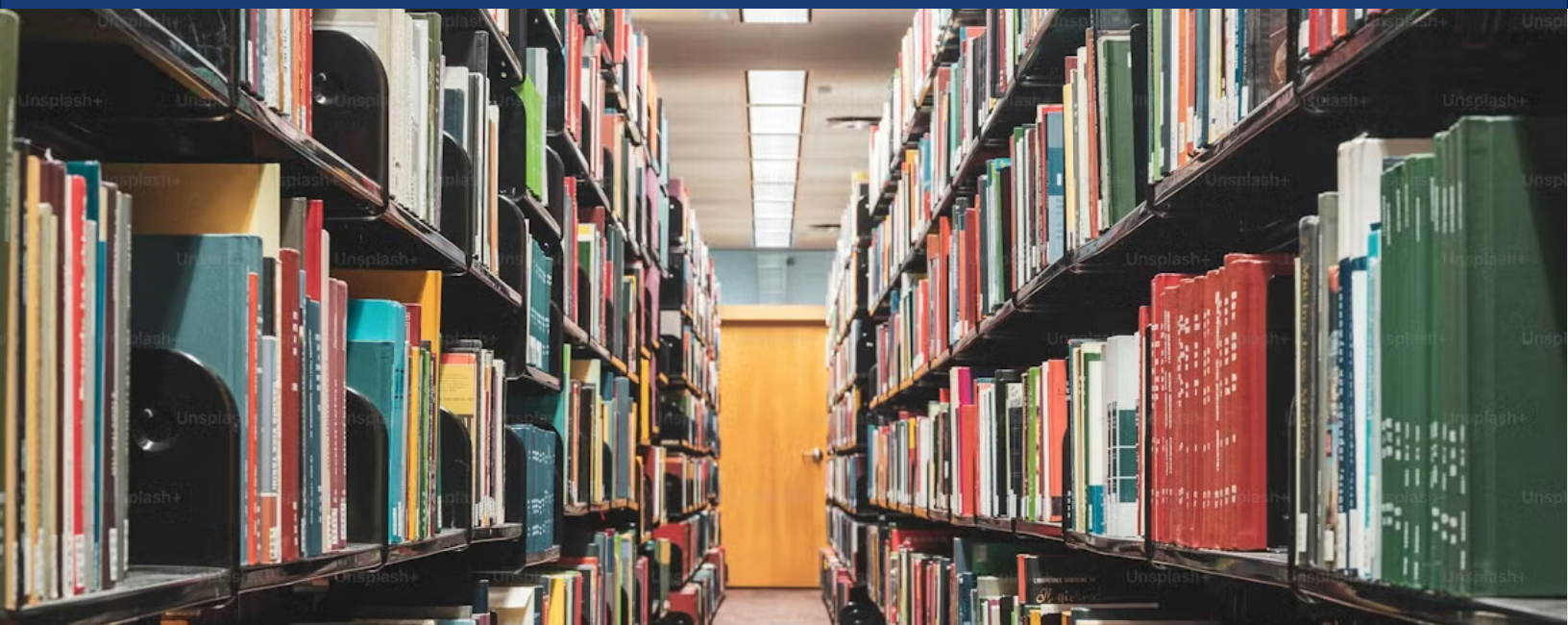


GUIDANCE FOR K-12 ADMINISTRATORS

*Best Practices for Ensuring Accurate,
Educationally Sound, and Inclusive Curricula*



***How to use this resource:** Intended for K-12 school and district leaders, this guidance provides practical standards and best practices for evaluating curricula, instructional materials, and educational programs, particularly when navigating contested issues or concerns about ideological advocacy, bias, or viewpoint diversity in the classroom.*

INTRODUCTION

Education should equip students with the knowledge and critical thinking skills needed to participate thoughtfully in a diverse democratic society. An important part of this mission is teaching students about challenging and sometimes controversial political, social, historical, cultural, and religious issues when those topics are age-appropriate and relevant to the course.

Many academic subjects include *contested issues*, meaning topics on which experts in the field disagree about significant questions and where important aspects remain open to investigation. These may involve religion, race, identity, power, or historical interpretation among many subjects that generate ongoing scholarly debate. In the classroom, they should be examined through multiple evidence-based perspectives, with educators prepared to guide inquiry and foster respectful discussion.

In public schools and non-sectarian independent schools, the primary goal is not to persuade students to adopt a particular political, ideological, or religious viewpoint, but to help them understand complex issues, critically evaluate competing claims, and reach informed conclusions based on evidence.

In today's crowded educational landscape, school leaders are increasingly called upon to evaluate curricula, instructional materials, professional development, and outside programs, some of which are ideologically driven, blurring the line between education and advocacy. This type of instruction often:

- Encourages students to adopt particular political, ideological, or religious viewpoints rather than examine them critically.
- Presents incomplete or inaccurate accounts of historical events.
- Portrays certain groups in ways that are unfair, exclusionary, or demeaning.

These approaches can undermine the educational goals of fostering independent thinking, evidence-based reasoning, and intellectual curiosity. They can also contribute to division, intolerance, and exclusion—serious concerns for any school.

This guide from American Jewish Committee (AJC) offers **practical steps for reviewing and selecting curricula, educational materials, and programs** to help ensure instruction is accurate, inclusive, and aligned with educational standards and nondiscrimination obligations.¹ We encourage school leaders to use them to support school policies and practices across academic subjects.

We note that these steps are particularly important when teaching about Jews, Jewish identity, antisemitism, and the Jewish people's historical connection to Israel, topics that are frequently misunderstood, omitted, distorted, or politicized. For this reason, we also provide additional guidance below on teaching about the Jewish community.

1. Recognize How Ideologically Driven Curricula Show Up in Classrooms

The presence of a controversial idea is not, in itself, a problem. Instead, school leaders should focus on how that idea is taught and what students are expected to do with it.

Potential areas of concern include:

- **Advocacy Over Inquiry:** Curricula that use the classroom to advance specific political, ideological, or religious viewpoints rather than foster inquiry, critical thinking, and examination of multiple perspectives. This may include advocacy-oriented approaches from across the political spectrum, such as Liberated Ethnic Studies, Christian nationalist ideology, or other forms of instruction that treat activism for a particular cause or belief system, belief formation, or accepting predetermined conclusions as educational goals.

- **One-sided Teaching:** Contested claims presented as settled fact, complex issues reduced to simplistic ideological frameworks (e.g., oppressor/oppressed, moral/immoral), and a lack of meaningful viewpoint diversity on unsettled topics.
- **Ideological Conformity:** Students being evaluated on whether they adopt particular political, ideological, or religious beliefs, rather than being assessed on the quality of their reasoning and evidence.
- **Identity-Based Essentialism:** Students being encouraged to understand themselves or others solely through fixed identity categories, or to assign inherent moral significance to those categories. All identities are nuanced, and these important discussions deserve appropriate attention to history, complexity, and multiple perspectives.

2. Apply Consistent Standards to All Curricula

Schools should evaluate all curricula using the same educational standards, regardless of subject matter or political, ideological, or religious orientation. Key standards include:

- **Educational Purpose:** Instruction should advance clearly defined academic learning objectives. Educational programs should prioritize knowledge acquisition, critical thinking, evidence-based analysis, and informed decision-making.
- **Accuracy and Integrity:** Materials should be age-appropriate, grounded in credible scholarship and reliable evidence, and presented with appropriate historical and social context. Schools should provide students with the information, evidence, and range of scholarly perspectives necessary to understand the topic.
- **Viewpoint Diversity and Scholarly Debate:** When teaching contested issues, instruction should distinguish between established facts, interpretations, opinions, and unresolved questions. Students should be encouraged to analyze ideas and evidence rather than accept predetermined conclusions.

3. Teach Complex Topics Responsibly

While curriculum standards establish what students are expected to learn, teachers are responsible for delivering instruction in ways that promote meaningful learning, critical thinking, and respectful dialogue. When teaching contested or unsettled issues, important principles include:

¹ We note that different legal requirements will apply to schools depending on factors such as whether they are public or independent, how they are funded, and where they are located. We also note that all state educational standards are subject to compliance with state and federal law and constitutional norms. Because a school's individual legal obligations will vary, this guidance is not intended to provide specific legal advice. We encourage schools to review their specific situations and needs with legal counsel.

- **Professional Responsibility:** Teachers should implement adopted curriculum and instructional standards. While educators necessarily exercise professional judgment in how approved material is taught, that discretion should be used to deepen student understanding and critical thinking, not be used to promote personal political, ideological, or religious beliefs.
- **Present Issues Fairly and Accurately:** When discussing contested issues, ensure students engage directly with evidence, competing interpretations, and the reasoning that supports different viewpoints.
- **Distinguish Facts, Interpretations, and Opinions:** Equip students to evaluate the credibility of sources, assess the veracity and reliability of information, weigh evidence, and recognize misinformation or unsupported claims. Because conspiracy theories have long served as a vehicle for antisemitism and other forms of prejudice, helping students evaluate the veracity of information and identify misinformation strengthens both media literacy and their ability to participate thoughtfully in a democratic society.
- **Promote Civil Discourse and Intellectual Humility:** Foster a classroom culture that encourages curiosity, respectful disagreement, active listening, and thoughtful engagement with differing viewpoints. Doing so helps students develop the capacity to learn from others, reconsider their own assumptions, and engage challenging issues with openness.
- **Encourage Independent Thinking:** Create opportunities for students to ask questions and develop their own informed conclusions based on evidence and reasoned analysis.

4. Establish Strong Systems for Oversight, Transparency, and Accountability

Strong governance structures help ensure that educational standards are applied consistently, build trust with families, and provide clear expectations for educators and staff. Effective systems should include:

- **Review and Approval Processes:** Establish school- or district-wide procedures for reviewing and approving curriculum, instructional materials, professional development programs, and external providers. Reviews should examine learning objectives, source materials, assignments, assessment methods, and alignment with district expectations, standards, and legal requirements.
- **Transparency with Families:** Provide families with meaningful advance access to curriculum information and instructional resources, particularly when contested or sensitive topics will be addressed. Early communication creates opportunities for constructive dialogue and collaborative problem-solving before concerns arise.

- **Reporting and Response Mechanisms:** Establish clear processes for students, families, and staff to raise concerns about curriculum, instructional materials, classroom practices, or outside providers. These processes should designate a point person, explain how concerns will be reviewed, communicate outcomes, and ensure concerns are addressed in a timely and appropriate manner.
- **Ongoing Monitoring and Accountability:** Conduct periodic reviews of curricula, instructional materials, professional development programs, and external partnerships to ensure continued alignment with educational standards, district policies, and legal obligations.
- **Continuous Improvement:** Use feedback, periodic reviews, and stakeholder input to strengthen instructional practices, improve oversight procedures, and refine decision-making over time.

5. Protect Student Rights and Ensure Nondiscrimination

Schools should approach contested or unsettled issues in a manner consistent with their obligation to provide equal educational opportunity and maintain a learning environment where all students can participate fully. In centering these priorities, educational programs should ensure:

- **Equal Access:** Ensure that all students are treated with dignity and have equal access to educational opportunities, regardless of their background, identity, beliefs, or viewpoints.
- **Avoiding Stereotypes and Exclusion:** Ensure that instructional materials and classroom practices do not stereotype, dehumanize, denigrate, exclude, or marginalize individuals or groups.
- **Cultivating Openness:** Support students' ability to ask questions, explore ideas, and express viewpoints respectfully without discrimination, harassment, or retaliation.
- **No Compelled Beliefs:** Avoid compelling students to adopt, affirm, reject, or disclose political, ideological, or religious beliefs. Students should be evaluated based on academic performance, evidence, reasoning, and engagement with course material rather than ideological agreement.

6. Prioritize Professional Development

Meaningful guidance and training for classroom teachers is crucial to building their skills and confidence in presenting contested issues and enhancing student learning consistent with school or district expectations. Key elements include:

- Train educators to facilitate discussions on complex and sensitive issues and how to distinguish between inquiry-based instruction and advocacy.

- ° Schools should consider using discussion frameworks such as Structured Academic Controversy, which is designed to help students explore complex topics without turning the conversation into a “winner take all” debate, or other models that foster evidence-based inquiry, perspective-taking, and active listening.
- Equip educators to recognize and address bias, stereotypes, misinformation, and antisemitism, including in curricula and educational materials.
 - ° For additional information on how to evaluate organizations and programs that provide such training, please see [AJC’s Guidance for K-12 Administrators to Evaluate Programs About Antisemitism](#).²
- Share district policies and instructional expectations consistently with educators. Consider identifying a staff point person to support implementation by providing training, answering questions, monitoring compliance, and sharing best practices throughout the school or district.

7. Ensure Inclusion of Jewish Identity and Experience

The Jewish community, like any other community, should be reflected in the curriculum in an accurate, inclusive, and nuanced way. Schools should:

- Accurately represent Jewish history, culture, religion, ethnicity, peoplehood, and lived experiences of Jewish people.
- Reflect the diversity of Jewish communities and perspectives.
- Present discussions involving Israel, Zionism, and the Middle East in a historically grounded and appropriately contextualized manner.
- Address antisemitism as a distinct form of prejudice and discrimination.
- Avoid stereotypes, omissions, and historical distortions involving Jewish people. To learn more about how antisemitism may surface in educational and discourse generally, see AJC’s detailed resource [Translate Hate](#).³
- Ensure Jewish students are not treated as representatives of all Jews, Judaism, Zionism, or Israel.

For additional information, see AJC’s resources:

- Action Plans for [Public](#)⁴ and [Independent](#)⁵ Schools

- [Guidance for K-12 Schools to Ensure the Jewish Experience is Included Across the Curriculum](#)⁶
- [Who Are the Jewish People?](#)⁷
- [Guidance for K-12 Administrators to Evaluate Programs About Antisemitism](#)⁸

8. Partner with Qualified Subject-Matter Experts

- Seek curricular input, professional development, and resources from organizations such as AJC with demonstrated expertise in relevant fields. For curriculum related to Jewish life and history, we specifically recommend:
 - ° [Centropa](#)⁹: Central and Eastern European culture and life before World War II
 - ° [ConnectED](#)¹⁰: Jewish history, Israel, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, civic engagement, social media literacy
 - ° [Echoes and Reflections](#)¹¹: Holocaust
 - ° [Facing History and Ourselves](#)¹²: Civic education, dialogue across difference, antisemitism/Holocaust
 - ° [Institute for Curriculum Services](#)¹³: Jews, Judaism, American Jewish history, antisemitism, and the Arab-Israeli conflict
 - ° [JIMENA: Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa](#)¹⁴: Sephardi and Mizrahi Jewish history and culture
 - ° [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#)¹⁵: Holocaust
 - ° [Weitzman Museum of American Jewish History](#)¹⁶: American Jewish history
- Evaluate external partners using the same standards applied to curricular materials, including accuracy, transparency, educational quality, and respect for student rights. To assess providers and programs regarding antisemitism, please refer to AJC’s [Guidance for K-12 Administrators to Evaluate Programs About Antisemitism](#).¹⁷

CONCLUSION

Schools should expose students to complex and contested ideas while preserving the distinction between teaching about a viewpoint and requiring students to accept it. By establishing clear standards, protecting student rights, and promoting inquiry over advocacy, school leaders can help ensure that students build knowledge, develop empathy, engage thoughtfully with differing perspectives, and reach their own informed conclusions.

2 [AJC.org/GuidanceK12EvaluateAntisemitismPrograms](#)

3 [AJC.org/translatehateglossary](#)

4 [AJC.org/ActionPlanK12PublicSchools](#)

5 [AJC.org/ActionPlanK12IndependentSchools](#)

6 [AJC.org/GuidanceK12CurriculumAudit](#)

7 [AJC.org/whoarethejewishpeople](#)

8 [AJC.org/GuidanceK12EvaluateAntisemitismPrograms](#)

9 [Centropa.org/en](#)

10 [Connectededucation.org/](#)

11 [Echoesandreflections.org/](#)

12 [Facinghistory.org/](#)

13 [Icsresources.org/](#)

14 [Jimena.org/sephardic-and-mizrahi-lesson-plans/](#)

15 [Ushmm.org/teach](#)

16 [Theweitzman.org/education/](#)

17 [AJC.org/GuidanceK12EvaluateAntisemitismPrograms](#)

About AJC and the Center for Education Advocacy

American Jewish Committee (AJC) is the global advocacy organization for the Jewish people. We create trusted partnerships with leaders around the world to ensure Jews and Israel are safe and thriving.

With an unparalleled reach spanning six continents, AJC engages leaders in more than 110 countries through 40 offices and dozens of partnerships with Jewish communities worldwide. Wherever the Jewish people and Israel need us, AJC is there—empowering leaders in government, education, partner communities, and the private sector to counter antisemitism and act as allies.

AJC's **Center for Education Advocacy** partners with school leaders, families, and policymakers to help schools build lasting capacity to recognize and respond to antisemitism, include Jews and Jewish life, and embrace democratic values. Grounded in critical thinking, viewpoint diversity, and fact-based inquiry, and backed by decades of experience in K-12 education, our approach reflects the same educational values schools strive to uphold. To explore CEA's full library of guidance documents and toolkits, visit: [AJC.org/EducationResources](https://ajc.org/EducationResources).

To learn more about CEA's educational programming for administrators, faculty, students, or your school community, visit [AJC.org/CEA](https://ajc.org/CEA) or email education@ajc.org.