Talking to Students about Politics and Candidates Acceptable Practice

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Being a responsive and engaged citizen who votes regularly and consistently communicates with legislators and other key decision makers is a responsibility of all who live in a democracy. For those who are employed by a government-funded agency like a public school, when does discussing issues and candidates go beyond educating to influencing student opinion and possibly threatening one’s employment status?

WHY POLITICAL ADVOCACY AND ENGAGEMENT ARE IMPORTANT TO TEACH

Education about elections, voting, and the political process is critically important today in the era of “fake news” and fact-checking candidates and elected officials. A Stanford study (McEvers, 2016) points out the difficulties students have evaluating online information, finding that “[large portions of the students—at times as much as 80 or 90 percent] had trouble judging the credibility of the news they read.”

Education can also be a potent force in preparing students for civic engagement. A recent report of college preparatory charter schools with a strong focus on civics and responsible citizenship found increased voter registrations and voting among its graduates who mostly represented low-income, minority families (Gill et al., 2018).

Teaching about the political process is not just for social studies teachers. The new AASL National School Library Standards are based on six common beliefs. Two of them directly address educating students about their rights to access and share information to make life choices:

Common Belief #3: “Learners should be prepared for college, career, and life.” Students need to develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society.

Common Belief #5: “Intellectual freedom is every learner’s right.” Students must recognize that “learners have a right to speak and hear what others have to say, rather than allowing others to control their access to ideas and information” (AASL, 2018, p. 13).

In addition to academic standards relative to teaching government and politics, most states have additional requirements for civic education (see Cardinali, 2018, to check your state).

HOW TO TEACH POTENTIALLY DIVISIVE POLITICAL TOPICS (AND KEEP YOUR JOB!)

As employees of a local government agency (a public school), school librarians should focus on informing and educating by presenting factual, nonpartisan information. Librarians should not discuss their personal preferences about political parties and candidates with students. They may hold mock elections and facilitate student research projects in which the students form their own opinions or craft persuasive essays, op-eds, and the like. The instructional approach must be unbiased, however, promoting responsible citizenship that respects the diversity of everyone’s political opinions.

ALA’s Washington office’s Kevin Maher (personal communication, August 20, 2018) recommends presenting all sides of an issue, maintaining impartiality and allowing students to draw their own conclusions. He also suggests that even though ALA encourages legislators’ visits to libraries, during campaign season it is best to wait until after the election. Even if you invite all candidates but only one responds, this can be seen as endorsement of the one candidate. In most cases, principals will not permit legislator or candidate visits prior to elections.

John Chrastka, executive director of EveryLibrary, the only national organization dedicated exclusively to political action at a local level to create, renew, and protect public funding for libraries of all types, also founded SaveSchoolLibrarians.org with support from Follett Learning. He makes a distinction between advocating and lobbying explaining:

Here at EveryLibrary, we encourage school librarians to use their personal time to talk about the issues that matter—which is advocacy—and to talk about bills or Election Day issues that matter—which is lobbying. But it should always be done on personal time or union time and not on work time. One great advantage of unions is that “union time” is available and reserved for political actions. (J. Chrastka, personal communication, August 20, 2018)
EXERCISING YOUR FIRST AMENDMENT RIGHTS AS A PRIVATE CITIZEN

When school librarians are not in a school setting or performing duties related to their teaching positions, their rights under the First Amendment to free speech, assembly, and petition are generally protected, as with any US citizen. However, educators need to be cognizant of employment contracts and district policies regarding political activism, as some schools do have restrictions. Be aware of the school culture and norms, and when in doubt, talk to a school administrator and/or a representative of the teachers’ union.

SEEK ADVICE FIRST ON GRAY AREAS

As with most aspects of a legal nature, there are gray areas, many of which relate to social media. The ACLU publication “Free Speech Rights of Public School Teachers in Washington State” (2016) provides some good counsel regarding free speech for public school teachers, stating:

Generally, the First Amendment protects your speech if you are speaking as a private citizen on a matter of public concern. However, if you are speaking as part of the duties of your job, your speech will not necessarily have the same protection. What you say or communicate inside the classroom is considered speech on behalf of the school district and therefore is not entitled to First Amendment protection. Certain types of speech outside the school might also not be protected if the school can show that your speech created a substantial adverse impact on school functioning or that your speech was made in accordance with your job duties.

An article on the NEA website concurs: “Many teachers believe they have the absolute First Amendment right to post anything they want on social networking sites, including party pictures and diatribes about the boss. After all, they’re on their own time and using their own resources. However, the courts say otherwise, and teacher free speech rights are fairly limited: their speech is protected only if they speak out as citizens on ‘matters of public
concern’ and their speech doesn’t disrupt the school” (Ruland, n.d.).

In addition to providing examples from court cases, the ACLU document (2016) also recommends not displaying political signs and campaign literature or wearing candidate or party buttons in school. Regardless, discussing this with the principal first is the safest route. Wearing a button encouraging voting without endorsing a specific candidate is generally permissible.

**CONCLUSION**

Reading, writing, and math demand much of class time in today’s schools due to requirements to show progress as determined by standardized tests. Often subjects such as government and civics get short shrift. In addition, some educators shy away from teaching about politics in today’s politically polarized society.

School librarians teach information-literacy skills that are essential for students to navigate and interpret political rhetoric discussing candidates, elected officials, and issues that impact us all. Embedding information skills in civic education by collaborating with social studies and classroom teachers is a perfect opportunity for school librarians to demonstrate their value.

However, librarians and teachers need to be mindful of how such instruction is presented and conducted—to be nonpartisan, nonjudgmental, and neutral, allowing students to develop their own opinions and make their own choices. Despite the often unclear guidelines for educators teaching about politics, particularly in contentious election years, schools are by far the best places for students to learn how to be politically engaged.

**REFERENCES**


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