

Controversial issues - Topic 4: Controversial issues and school culture
Controversial issues and school culture – Safe to talk?

As school principal, you will be aware that the quality of everyday life and culture of a school can make a difference to how well students learn and achieve. It is exactly the same with controversial issues. Talking about difficult issues can be uncomfortable and worrying for teachers, students and parents alike. It is important, therefore, to create a school culture in which people feel free to **talk openly about sensitive issues without fear of criticism**.

A supportive school culture

What are the elements of such a culture? A culture which is likely to support the discussion of difficult issues is one which is:

- **safe** – everyone is free from bullying, name-calling and intimidation
- **welcoming** – everyone is known as an individual and feels part of the common school community
- **open** – everyone is free to form, experiment with and express their own ideas
- **inclusive** – everyone is able participate in any school activity on an equal basis
- **rights-respecting** – everyone’s human rights are respected, especially freedom of expression, belief and religion, privacy and freedom from degrading treatment
- **democratic** – everyone has a say in school decision-making.

School rules and behavior policies

Having the right school rules or behavior policies and enforcing these appropriately goes a long way towards establishing the kind of culture you need. This applies as much to the rules that guide everyday behavior in and around the school as well as the rules which teachers use to guide classroom discussions.

Are there any areas of controversy which the prevailing culture in your school prevents the teachers from discussing with their students? If so, what are these and why?

