

Briefing for Schools on Teaching about political issues, maintaining impartiality avoiding partisan activity

This briefing is based on DFE advice to schools. It summarises key things for schools to consider when teaching politics and political issues in a broad and balanced curriculum. It summarises relevant aspects of the law in relation to remaining impartial and avoiding partisan activity.

Political education is an important part of a broad and balanced education that prepares young people for adult life, and we want young people to be informed and engaged citizens. Teaching about the political system including voting and elections, and consideration of political issues is a key part of national curriculum citizenship.

There are clear references in law for councils, governing bodies and school leaders to follow to avoid biased or unbalanced discussion of political issues. This has been the case since the Education Act 1996 was introduced. Schools should be aware of their duties regarding impartiality and balanced treatment of political issues in the classroom.

Legislation

- The Law prohibits the advancement of one-sided political activities to children under 12 in schools. Where pupils are exposed to political material it should be in a balanced way. Where a particular view is one-sided, pupils must be informed that there are alternative credible views on the same issue. The duty to prevent pupils being exposed to one-sided political views falls on local authorities, head teachers, school governors and proprietors. Enforcement of these duties depends on the specific type of school. (See below)
- Those responsible should evaluate political material that pupils are exposed to and check that it is not one-sided or biased. Where possible, alternative views should be presented, but at the very least, it should be explained to pupils that there are credible alternative views.

Ensuring impartiality - Teachers and resources

- Teachers are not prevented from expressing political views or engaging in political activity, but they must not express partisan views to pupils and schools have a duty to prevent this from happening.
- Teachers should be opening the minds of their pupils through education and ensure a balance of viewpoints is presented when teaching about political issues and topics. This is why politically biased teaching resources are illegal.
- School resources should only be used for school-related activity. If someone suspects that a teacher is using school resources inappropriately they should refer the matter to the governing body.
- Schools have a duty to ensure that all teaching resources are appropriate, including those supplied by third parties.

Citizenship

- Citizenship education is a statutory national curriculum subject for 11 to 16-year olds. The [programmes of study](#) are designed to prepare pupils to play a full and active part in society, and are organised around core knowledge about democracy, government, and how laws are made and upheld. Pupils are also taught about the political system, voting and elections.
- Citizenship education equips pupils with the skills and knowledge to explore political and social issues critically, to weigh evidence, debate and make reasoned arguments.
- Schools should be aware of their duties regarding impartiality and treatment of political issues. Sections 406 and 407 of the Education Act 1996 require maintained schools to prevent political indoctrination and secure the balanced treatment of political issues. This duty is reflected in the model funding agreement for academies and free schools. (see below)

Resources to support teaching

- Teaching resources and advice are available from the Association for Citizenship Teaching www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk. ACT also quality-assures resources provided by other publishers.
- Resources and advice for teaching about the General Election 2019 are available from www.educatege.com, a non-partisan collection of teaching materials designed by a range of organisations and coordinated by The Politics Project.
- Further advice on teaching controversial and sensitive issues is available from <https://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/resource/prevent-duty-and-controversial-issues-creating-curriculum-response-through-citizenship>

What the legislation says and means for schools

- Section 406 of the Education Act 1996 prohibits the pursuit of partisan political activities by any of those registered pupils (under the age of twelve) at a maintained school (on school premises and those organised by any members of the school staff outside of school premises) and the promotion of partisan political views in the teaching of any subject in the school.
- Section 407 of the 1996 Act requires that, where political issues are brought to the attention of pupils, they are offer a balanced presentation of opposing views.

Academies:

- Section 406 and 407 do not apply to academy trusts. Academy trusts are regulated by their funding agreement with the Secretary of State as charitable companies via their articles of association and the Charity Commission guidance, and subject to the Independent School Standards and the Academies Financial Handbook.
- As charities, Academies may be able to take part in political activity if it is to enable the delivery of their charitable objects, but they cannot give their support to a political party. They also need to take particular care during an election period. It is, however, difficult to see how a partisan political view can further the charitable purpose of an academy trust.

Independent schools:

- The Independent School Standards make two provisions, both in standard 5, which deals with spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils.
 - Paragraph 5(c) of the standards forbids the promotion of partisan political views in the school's teaching.
 - Paragraph 5(d) of the standards requires that where political issues are covered, children are offered a balanced presentation of opposing views.

Complaints:

If someone suspects that a teacher is using school resources inappropriately, they should refer the matter to the governing body.

Parents or others wishing to make a complaint should, in the first instance, go through the school's complaints process. If the matter is not resolved, and they feel that the school is acting unlawfully, they should then refer the matter to the Department for Education via www.gov.uk/complain-about-school/state-schools

Further information

What the legislation says

S406/407 Education ACT

406 Political indoctrination.

- (1) The local education authority, governing body and head teacher shall forbid—
 - (a) the pursuit of partisan political activities by any of those registered pupils at a maintained school who are junior pupils, and
 - (b) the promotion of partisan political views in the teaching of any subject in the school.
- (2) In the case of activities which take place otherwise than on the school premises, subsection (1)(a) applies only where arrangements for junior pupils to take part in the activities are made by—
 - (a) any member of the school's staff (in his capacity as such), or
 - (b) anyone acting on behalf of the school or of a member of the school's staff (in his capacity as such).
- (3) In this section "maintained school" includes [F1a community or foundation special school] established in a hospital.

407 Duty to secure balanced treatment of political issues.

- (1) The local education authority, governing body and head teacher shall take such steps as are reasonably practicable to secure that where political issues are brought to the attention of pupils while they are—
 - (a) in attendance at a maintained school, or
 - (b) taking part in extra-curricular activities which are provided or organised for registered pupils at the school by or on behalf of the school, they are offered a balanced presentation of opposing views.

DFE Guidance Staffing and employment advice for schools

This Guidance was recently updated to include:

5.33 All staff have a responsibility to ensure that they act appropriately in terms of their behaviour, the view expressed (in particular political views) and the use of school resources at all times, and should not use school resources for party political purposes. (p25)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staffing-and-employment-advice-for-schools>