PUBLIC HEARING

Board of Education of Howard County
Meeting Agenda Item

DATE: November 19, 2026

TITLE: Policy 8050 Teaching of Controversial Issues

PRESENTER(S): Renee Bos, Coordinator, Secondary Social Studies and Kimberly Eggborn, Coordinator, Elementary Social Studies

STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT:

Mission: HCPSS creates an innovative and accountable learning community where we expand opportunities and access, remove barriers, and foster an inclusive environment.

Key Commitment: Creating innovative learning and working environments.
Priority Area: Enhance Systemic Planning & Procedures
Goal: Improve Operational Responsiveness

OVERVIEW:
Attached is the Policy Analysis, which includes the proposed policy draft and implementation procedures. In the policy draft, the markup identifies the original language from the current policy and highlights the proposed revisions.

The proposed revisions were reviewed by the Superintendent's Standing Policy Committee (SPAC) on October 14, 2026. The recommendations will be submitted to the Board's Policy Committee for additional review on January 7, 2027, with a final recommendation presented to the Board for approval on February 25, 2027.

A 30-day public comment period began on September 24, 2026.

~~RECOMMENDATION/~~FUTURE DIRECTION:
The Board will take action to adopt revised Policy 8050 Teaching of Controversial Issues on February 25, 2027. The policy will be effective on July 1, 2027.

Submitted by:	Antwan L. Perry, Ed.D. Policy Manager	**Approval/ Concurrence:**	William J. Barnes Superintendent
	Renee Bos Coordinator Secondary Social Studies		Karalee Turner-Little, Ph.D. Deputy Superintendent
	Kimberly Eggborn Coordinator Elementary Social Studies		Jennifer Webster, Ed.D. Chief Academic Officer

HCPSS POLICY 8050 - Teaching of Controversial Issues

Policy Analysis and Proposed Revision

Review Year: 2026–2027
Policy Area: Instruction and Curriculum
Status: In Review

Executive Summary

HCPSS Policy 8050, *Teaching of Controversial Issues*, establishes expectations for how significant academic, social, political, cultural, and ideological issues are addressed in HCPSS classrooms.

The policy recognizes that students should have opportunities to examine important issues, consider credible information and multiple perspectives, engage in respectful discussion, and develop and express their own views. It also requires controversial issues to be addressed objectively, impartially, and in ways that are appropriate for students' age and maturity.

The proposed includes the following policy highlights:

- Teachers who have concerns about presenting a controversial issue with inclusive and supportive pedagogy will seek assistance from their administrator and the appropriate curricular office within the Division of Academics about methods for facilitating a discussion.
- The Division of Academics, working with the Division of Schools and school-based administrators, will develop school-based procedures for approving controversial issues to be considered in the classroom.
- Definitions for Age Appropriate, HCPSS Employee, and Parent were added.

The proposed changes are intended to support teachers, protect students, provide clarity for families, and ensure that HCPSS remains aligned with Maryland law and constitutional requirements.

A. Issues and Questions Addressed

Why is Policy 8050 being reviewed?

Policy 8050 has been in place for many years, with its most recent substantive revision in 2020. The educational environment has continued to change, including the rapid growth of social media, digital information, artificial intelligence, and increasingly complex public discussions of social, political, scientific, and cultural issues.

The review asks whether the current policy continues to provide clear and consistent guidance to teachers and administrators while protecting students' ability to learn about and respectfully discuss controversial issues.

Examples of the types of questions that will be addressed by the review:

1. What should qualify as a "controversial issue" for purposes of classroom instruction?
2. What does objective and impartial instruction look like in practice?
3. How should teachers present multiple perspectives while distinguishing credible evidence from unsupported claims?
4. What protections should students have when expressing differing viewpoints?
5. What professional learning and guidance do teachers and administrators need?
6. How should implementation be monitored?

B. Cost Analysis and Fiscal Impact

No direct fiscal impact is anticipated from revising Policy 8050.

Implementation may require staff time for:

- updating implementation procedures;
- developing guidance and instructional resources;
- curriculum and policy alignment;
- communication with families and students; and
- monitoring implementation.

These activities can largely be incorporated into existing HCPSS instructional, professional learning, and administrative structures.

C. Relationship to Other Board Policies

Policy 8050 operates as part of a larger framework governing teaching and learning.

Policy	Relationship to Policy 8050
8000 – Curriculum	Establishes the overall curriculum framework within which controversial issues are taught.
8040 – Selection of Instructional Resources	Governs resources used to teach controversial issues and requires consideration of diverse perspectives.
8060 – Resource Speakers	Requires resource speakers addressing controversial issues to comply with Policy 8050.
8070 – Religion and Religious Materials	Establishes requirements for objective and neutral instruction involving religion.
1000 – Civility	Establishes expectations for respectful communication and interaction.
1010 – Anti-Discrimination	Prohibits discrimination and establishes expectations for inclusive and respectful educational environments.
1040 – Safe and Supportive Schools	Provides the broader framework for safe and supportive learning environments.
1080 – Educational Equity	Supports equitable access to learning and consideration of diverse perspectives.
8080 – Responsible Use of Technology, Digital Tools, and Social Media	Applies when digital platforms and technology are used in connection with controversial issues.

The revised Policy 8050 should clarify these relationships rather than duplicate requirements contained in other policies.

D. Legal Requirements

Policy 8050 is not required by one specific Maryland law. Instead, it operates within federal and state requirements governing public education, curriculum, student rights, and nondiscrimination.

Maryland requirements

Maryland regulations establish curriculum and instructional requirements in areas that may involve controversial issues, including social studies, science, English language arts, comprehensive health education, and religious education.

Policy 8050 must therefore support, rather than restrict, instruction required by Maryland standards and regulations.

Student expression

The First Amendment protects students' rights to freedom of speech and expression, subject to the authority of public schools to maintain an appropriate educational environment.

The policy should protect students who respectfully express differing viewpoints while recognizing that schools may establish reasonable instructional expectations and address conduct that interferes with teaching and learning.

Nondiscrimination

Teaching controversial issues does not permit discrimination, harassment, stereotyping, or retaliation. Instruction must remain consistent with applicable civil rights laws and HCPSS policies.

E. Similar Policies in Maryland

HCPSS is not alone in maintaining a policy addressing controversial issues.

Baltimore County Public Schools, Policy 6012

Baltimore County's policy emphasizes:

- objective and impartial presentation;
- relevant instructional goals;
- student maturity;
- multiple viewpoints;
- credible information; and
- students' ability to form and respectfully express their own opinions.

Frederick County Public Schools, Policy 516

Frederick County addresses controversial issues through a policy that emphasizes:

- impartial and objective examination;

- credible information;
- multiple perspectives;
- student maturity;
- respectful discussion; and
- appropriate consideration of current issues and historical materials.

Key finding: The proposed HCPSS revisions are consistent with the general direction of comparable Maryland policies while providing clearer guidance for HCPSS educators and families.

F. Draft Proposed Policy

Policy 8050 – Teaching of Controversial Issues

See attached policy and implementation procedures.

G. Alternatives Considered

Alternative 1 – Maintain the Current Policy

Benefits: No disruption and minimal implementation costs.

Concern: Existing language does not provide sufficient clarity in several areas, including multiple perspectives, objectivity, current events, and implementation consistency.

Alternative 2 – Make Limited Amendments

Benefits: Less disruption and a faster revision process.

Concern: Targeted changes may not fully resolve the broader questions identified during the review.

Alternative 3 – Comprehensive Revision

Benefits: Provides clearer expectations for educators, students, and families while preserving the fundamental purpose of the current policy.

Concern: Requires additional stakeholder engagement, professional learning, and implementation work.

Recommended Alternative

Alternative 3 – Comprehensive Revision is recommended.

H. Superintendent Reporting and Implementation

The Superintendent/designee should monitor implementation through existing instructional and administrative structures.

Monitoring may include:

- professional learning provided;
- questions or implementation concerns received from schools;
- guidance developed or revised;
- recurring issues identified across schools; and
- other aggregate information necessary to determine whether the policy is being implemented consistently.

The Superintendent/designee should provide the Board with an **implementation update approximately one year after the revised policy takes effect**.

The report should focus on aggregate information and should protect confidential student and employee information.

I. Timeline for Adoption

Timeframe	Action
Fall 2026	Staff research and stakeholder engagement
September 24, 2026	Board consideration and first read
October 14, 2026	Standing Policy Advisory Committee review
Fall/Winter 2026	Draft revisions and legal review
Fall/Winter 2026	Stakeholder/public review
November 5, 2026	Board's Policy Committee review
Winter 2026	Final revisions

Timeframe	Action
December 15, 2026	Second read and Board adoption
July 1, 2027	Target effective date
2027–28	Implementation and professional learning
2028	Superintendent implementation report

The timeline may be adjusted based on stakeholder feedback, legal review, and the Board's meeting calendar.

Howard County Public School System
Board of Education

POLICY 8050
TEACHING OF CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

Effective: ~~July 1, 2019~~
July 1, 2027

THIS IS AN UNOFFICIAL DOCUMENT PROVIDED AS A TOOL FOR STUDYING PROPOSED CHANGES

Policy Outline

I. Policy Value Statement
II. Purpose
III. Standards
IV. Responsibilities
V. Delegation of Authority
VI. Definitions
VII. References
VIII. History

I. Policy Value Statement

The Board of Education of Howard County (Board) recognizes the role of public education in preparing students for effective citizenship. Consequently, the instructional program developed to achieve this purpose must appropriately emphasize ~~cultural heritage,~~ critical thinking~~,~~ and the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of living in a pluralistic society. The Board also recognizes that as students prepare for active engagement in participatory democracy, they often encounter issues that may be considered controversial. The Board of Education encourages the examination of controversial issues related to Board approved curricula in an impartial and objective manner. The examination of controversial issues should occur in inclusive and supportive learning environments that encourage respect for multiple perspectives. The Board also encourages community stakeholders, students, ~~school system~~ Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) employees, parents, service providers, and each member of the community to support the teaching of controversial issues in the classroom in order to promote the development of civic efficacy, student engagement, and critical thinking among our students.

II. Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to establish guidelines for the teaching of controversial issues.

~~I~~V~~I~~II. Standards

A. A controversial issue may be addressed in the classroom when the following conditions are met:

1. The issue has political, economic, cultural, or social significance and is presented within curricular guidelines.
2. Teachers have communicated to students how to practice civil discourse.
3. Students are provided access to relevant and credible information pertaining to the issue under study.
4. Students are able to form and express their own opinions on the issue without jeopardizing their relationships with teachers or the school.

B. Controversial issues must be presented as follows:

1. In an age appropriate manner.
2. With a goal of encouraging discussion and building mutual understanding of the topic.
3. With access to and respect for multiple perspectives and sources that are founded in relevant and credible information.
4. In a learning environment that is safe, supportive, inclusive, and focused on an academic examination of the issue.
5. In alignment with the school system's curriculum, mission, and vision.

C. A sensitive issue may be related to a controversial issue or may lead to a discussion about a controversial issue. Therefore, sensitive issues should be addressed in accordance with Section I~~V~~II.B.5. of this policy ~~and Policy 8000 Curriculum.~~

D. The use of resource speakers in teaching controversial issues is permitted ~~in accordance with Policy 8060 Resource Speakers~~.

E. ~~Teachers will teach controversial issues in an objective and impartial manner.~~ Teachers who have concerns about presenting a controversial issue with inclusive and supportive pedagogy will seek assistance from ~~a supervisor~~ their administrator and the appropriate curricular office within the Division of Academics about methods for facilitating a discussion.

F. ~~School-based procedures~~ The Division of Academics, working with the Division of Schools and school-based administrators, will ~~be~~ develop~~ed~~ school-based procedures for approving controversial issues to be considered in the classroom.

IV. Responsibilities

A. The Superintendent/designee will ensure that students, parents, HCPSS employees, and third parties are notified of the provisions of this policy annually.

B. Teachers will present information in an objective manner, ensure multiple perspectives are represented, model citizenship and maintain adherence to related HCPSS policies as referenced in Section VII.B. of this policy.

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C. The Division of Academics, working with the Division of Schools and ~~S~~school-based administrators will develop and implement school-based procedures for approving controversial issues to be considered in the classroom.

D. The Division of Academics, particularly those with curricular responsibilities, will provide assistance, advice, and training with regard to the teaching of controversial issues.

~~V~~I. Delegation of Authority

The Superintendent is authorized to develop appropriate procedures for the implementation of this policy within the limits set forth by this policy.

VI~~I~~. Definitions

Within the context of this policy, the following definitions apply:

A. Age Appropriate – Educational activities and resources that are suitable to foster social, intellectual, communicative, and emotional development and to allow students to use their skills in these areas while considering the developmental level and physical skills.

~~A~~B. Citizenship – Having the right to participate in and to be represented in politics and for the purpose of this document refers to both global and national politics.

~~B~~C. Controversial Issues – Significant academic, social, political, and ideological matters about which there exists opposing viewpoints and/or multiple perspectives.

~~C~~D. Curriculum – The prescribed elements of programs and courses which state clearly and specifically what students are to know and be able to do, how well they will be able to do it, how they will meet the learning objectives and by what means they will be assessed. Sensitive and controversial issue topics are components of the curriculum.

E. HCPSS Employee – Any individual who is a permanent or temporary employee of the HCPSS whose compensation is paid in whole or part by the Board, including but not limited to, school-based administrators, teachers, substitute teachers, paraeducators, and other school-based and Central Office support staff.

~~D~~F. Objective – Not influenced by personal feelings or opinions in considering and representing facts.

G. Parent – Any one of the following, recognized as the adult(s) legally responsible for the student:

1. Biological Parent – A natural parent whose parental rights have not been terminated.

2. Adoptive Parent – A person who has legally adopted the student and whose parental rights have not been terminated.

3. Custodian – A person or agency appointed by the court as the legal custodian of the student and granted parental rights and responsibilities.

4. Guardian – A person who has been placed by the court in charge of the affairs of the student and granted parental rights and responsibilities.

5. Caregiver – An adult resident of Howard County who exercises care, custody or control over the student, but who is neither the biological parent nor legal guardian, as long as the person satisfies the requirements of the Education Article, §7-101(c) (Informal Kinship Care) or has a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) issued Verification of Release form entering into custodial arrangement with the federal government.

6. Foster Parent – An adult approved to care for a child who has been placed in the home by a State agency or a licensed child placement agency as provided by the Family Law Article, §5-507.

~~E~~H. Participatory Democracy – A process within which citizens either make decisions on policy and/or elect representatives in order to make laws and decisions on policy and implement those decisions.

~~F~~I. Perspectives – A point of view; a particular attitude toward or way of regarding something.

~~G~~J. Sensitive Issues – A resolved historical fact such as the Holocaust and slavery that must be addressed in a manner that supports a safe learning environment for students.

~~H~~K. Third Party – Parents, mentors, volunteers, vendors, contractors, and others with whom students or HCPSS employees interact during school or school-related activities.

VII. References

A. Legal
~~Code of Maryland Regulations~~ COMAR, 13A.04.04 ~~Religious Education~~
~~Code of Maryland Regulations~~ COMAR, 13A.04.08 ~~Program in Social Studies~~
~~Code of Maryland Regulations~~ COMAR, 13A.04.09 ~~Program in Science~~
~~Code of Maryland Regulations~~ COMAR, 13A.04.14 ~~Program in English Language Arts~~
~~Code of Maryland Regulations~~ COMAR, 13A.04.18 ~~Program in Comprehensive Health Education~~

B. ~~Other~~ Board Policies
Policy 1000 Civility

Policy 1010 Anti-Discrimination
Policy 1040 Safe and Supportive Schools
~~Policy 1060 Bullying, Cyberbullying, Harassment, or Intimidation~~
Policy 8000 Curriculum
Policy 8040 Selection of Instructional ~~Materials~~ Resources
Policy 8060 Resource Speakers
Policy 8070 Religion and Religious Materials
Policy 9460 Bullying, Cyberbullying, Harassment, and Intimidation Involving Students

C. Relevant Data Sources

D. Other

VIII. History[1]

ADOPTED: February 1, 1972
REVIEWED: ~~July 1, 2011~~
October 31, 2025
MODIFIED:
REVISED: March 8, 1990
April 28, 2005
February 13, 2020
December 15, 2026
EFFECTIVE: ~~July 1, 2020~~
July 1, 2027

[1] Key: ***Adopted***-Original date the Board took action to approve a policy; ***Reviewed***-The date the status of a policy was assessed by the Superintendent's Standing Policy Group; ***Modified***-The date the Board took action to alter a policy that based on the recommendation of the Superintendent/designee did not require a comprehensive examination; ***Revised***-The date the Board took action on a policy that based on the recommendation of the Superintendent/designee needed a comprehensive examination; ***Effective***-The date a policy is implemented throughout the HCPSS, typically July 1 following Board action.

Howard County Public School System

POLICY 8050-IP
IMPLEMENTATION PROCEDURES

TEACHING OF CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

Effective: ~~August 18, 2020~~
July 1, 2027

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I. The Division of Academics, working with school-based administrators and in accordance with curricular guidelines, bears the primary responsibility for the development of procedures and training for the teaching of controversial issues.

A. Assistance and guidance from the Division of Academics will be available to school-based administrators and teachers concerning topics related to the teaching of controversial issues such as, mitigating biases and facilitating discussions that include a variety of perspectives.

B. Teachers will ensure that their instruction is in accordance with the procedures and training referenced in Section I. above and maintains adherence to related Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) policies as referenced in Section VII.B. of this policy.

II. Teachers will use the following Board of Education approved criteria for determining the appropriateness of issues for consideration as a part of the curriculum:

A. The treatment of the issue in question will be within range, knowledge, maturity, and civic discourse skills of the students.

B. Credible and relevant information that represents multiple and diverse perspectives which address the complex aspects of an issue will be provided to students.

C. The issue should be significant and related to written curriculum and should not adversely impact instruction or pacing.

D. A teacher who has concerns about discussing a controversial issue with students should confer with ~~his/her~~ their administration and the appropriate curricular office within the Division of Academics.

III. In order to support the development of civic interest and efficacy, student engagement, and the critical thinking among HCPSS students, community stakeholders are encouraged to:

A. Support the goal of the HCPSS to create engaged participants in democracy by teaching students to address controversial issues with inquiry and civility.

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B. Work in partnership with HCPSS educators in the appropriate discussion of controversial issues.

C. Participate in students' education experiences by continuing to have civil and thoughtful conversations that reflect multiple perspectives.

IV. Monitoring

Policy 8050 implementation procedures, monitoring of policy, and any metrics and accountability of the policy will be overseen by the Division of Academics.

V. History[1]

ADOPTED: February 1, 1972
REVIEWED: ~~July 1, 2011~~
October 31, 2025
MODIFIED: August 18, 2020
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