



Vestal Central School District

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Vestal's Curriculum

November 22, 2021

Over the past few months our district has received a number of questions about “critical race theory.” We have had a number of conversations with residents about the way Vestal’s curricula deal with race, ethnicity and other sensitive issues. After discussing their concerns, most seem very satisfied with our district’s approach. We would like to take this opportunity to clarify our district’s position for a broader audience.

Is Critical Race Theory Part of the Curriculum at Vestal?

It is not. Critical race theory (CRT) is a body of legal and sociological scholarship that is most often taught at the graduate-level in college. It is not a K-12 curricular program. CRT is not part of the district’s curriculum. Nor do we have any plans to adopt it in the future.

What, if anything, does Vestal do to address issues of diversity, equity and inclusion?

While our curricula do not integrate CRT, our district *does* work to ensure that our school environment is free of harassment and discrimination, including that which is based on race. All public schools in New York State have an affirmative obligation to do this under laws such as the Dignity for All Students Act.

We understand that our students come from varied backgrounds, and that we are preparing all students for citizenship in a diverse community, nation, and world. We view difference as an asset that can enrich learning for all. Hence, we encourage faculty and staff to adopt culturally responsive methods. This approach involves providing the following for all students:

- Welcoming and affirming environments
- High expectations and rigorous instruction
- Inclusive curricula and assessments

To enact these principles, we regularly evaluate our curricula to ensure a diverse and balanced representation of many different cultures and viewpoints. We also provide our faculty and staff with ongoing professional learning experiences that promote inclusive and rigorous teaching that is sensitive to students’ home cultures and viewpoints.

How Does Vestal's Curriculum Approach the Teaching of Sensitive and Controversial Issues?

From time to time sensitive and controversial subjects do come up for classroom discussion, particularly in social studies and English language arts. Often this is because students themselves raise the issues. At other times they are an intentional part of the curriculum. At Vestal we believe that well-executed lessons on controversial subjects are an essential part of public schooling. In school, as in society at large, individuals will inevitably hold different views. If we are to prepare students for citizenship in a democracy, then they need to learn how to listen and read closely, to disagree respectfully, to craft claims and counterclaims supported by factual evidence and logical inferences, and to communicate their positions persuasively.

There is no question that it would be easier for educators to avoid teaching about controversy. It is also understandable that many parents would be concerned that one-sided views might be imposed on their students. However, the cost of avoiding controversy altogether is simply too high. Schools bear the primary responsibility for helping students develop civic literacy. We take this obligation seriously.

At Vestal we have offered teachers opportunities to learn how to use inquiry-based teaching to facilitate balanced discussions around controversial issues. This approach involves framing controversial issues around open questions, providing students with diverse and balanced information sources that can be used to support many different responses, facilitating discussions in non-partisan ways that are most likely to bring out varied perspectives, gently and respectfully challenging all students' views, and providing them with the feedback necessary to strengthen their oral and written argumentation.

Our students and families hold many different viewpoints. We see this diversity as a strength that, if properly utilized, can help prepare students for citizenship in an ideologically and culturally diverse world. As we design curriculum, we do not avoid controversy, but seek to use it in balanced and educational ways.

If residents have questions about specific aspects of our curriculum, then we would encourage them to continue to reach out to the district administration. As just about any teacher will tell you, facilitating balanced discussions is one of the most challenging parts of teaching. We are constantly working to improve our capacity to do this well, and we welcome any feedback that helps us accomplish that goal.

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