



Some pupils put their hands up to Christian Aid's Wave of Hope campaign moment, calling on world leaders to take action on climate change in the run-up to COP26.

## How do we get it right?

The requirement for politically impartial teaching does not mean that you should avoid enabling pupils to engage with politicians and other decision-makers. Or that you should shy away from discussing any issues that have political aspects. Ultimately, all important issues have some political aspects – and a central part of a child's education is to understand the key issues at play in our world and their rights and responsibilities in relation to these. A commitment to cultivating courageous advocacy in schools will inevitably require them to do so.

It is important, though, to present a balanced range of views where appropriate, noting that you do not have to be drawn into false equivalences or try to 'balance' every possible viewpoint, a point reinforced by the Government guidance (e.g. it is perfectly acceptable to present climate change as a fact, without giving airtime to climate deniers who reject established science). A good rule of

thumb is to consider: is there more than one widely-held viewpoint about this, and is it important for my pupils to understand that?

It is also very important that you are not partisan in your teaching (i.e. conveying your own party-political views). But you can absolutely encourage your pupils to engage with their local and national politicians and a great many of our Global Neighbours schools have done so to great effect; it can be an incredibly empowering and important part of political literacy (and exploring British Values around democracy) to understand that decision-makers are accountable to their constituents – including young people – and that we can all attempt to influence politicians' positions and decisions on issues.

Experiencing that political interaction first-hand through school can genuinely change the way pupils see themselves in the world and transform their understanding of

## The rules around political engagement in schools

Teachers are encouraged by the UK Government to explore political issues and politics in the classroom. However, it is important that schools are mindful of the legal requirement to be politically impartial. This guidance is designed to help teachers navigate this balancing act.

The Education Act 1996 in England aims to ensure that children are not presented with only one side of political or controversial issues by their teachers. Educators are required to take all reasonable steps to ensure that, where political or controversial issues are brought to young people's attention, they are offered a balanced presentation of opposing views.

This principle was reiterated in the UK Government's guidance to schools on political impartiality in schools, published in 2022. The recent guidance also stressed that there is no place for intolerant, racist or discriminatory views and that addressing the sharing of these in school be seen as part of schools' wider anti-bullying and safeguarding duties.

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their own relationship to power and decision-making. The important nuance for us is that it should always be the pupils' own, informed views that are conveyed – at no point should children be used as a vehicle for conveying someone's else's point of view.

### Political engagement in a school context SHOULD:

- Enable pupils to distinguish between facts and opinions when studying issues that have political dimensions and interrogating viewpoints.
- Encourage pupils to think widely and deeply about issues (asking 'why?').
- Teach about partisan political views where appropriate – which may include using documents, films and resources produced by particular groups that may promote partisan views – while taking care to ensure that pupils understand that these are contested views and that they still receive a balanced account of the political issue in question.
- Empower pupils to understand political processes and their own rights and responsibilities in society.
- Encourage them to think of creative solutions to problems (asking 'what can be done about it?') and evaluate different options open to them for taking action.
- Equip them to identify where power is located, who their political representatives are, and how decisions are made (asking 'who has the power to change this and what is my relationship to them?').
- Enable them to express themselves confidently, courteously and articulately to decision-makers and others.
- Enable pupils to express their own views on controversial issues and engage thoughtfully and respectfully with people holding alternative viewpoints.
- Support pupils to critically evaluate

the strengths and weaknesses of arguments that support a particular position on controversial issues.

- Promote opportunities to engage with elected representatives, taking care to ensure that partisan views expressed by a politician in any meeting or correspondence are suitably contextualised with reference to the existence of alternative views.
- Start from the position that most issues have a political dimension – and that 'the way things are' also reflects political choices and decisions, even though that might seem less obvious.

### It SHOULD NOT:

- Be party political (it is fine for pupils to research a particular politician's viewpoint – or government policy – on an issue and respond to it; it is not appropriate for teachers to make generalised partisan statements in school or convey their own political preferences).
- Spoon-feed actions to pupils.
- Pretend that complex problems have simple solutions.
- Fail to take account of a wide variety of different viewpoints.
- Encourage discrimination against people with different viewpoints.
- Be un-thinking or reactionary.
- Involve anything offensive, illegal or dangerous (obviously!).

### Further reading

Oxfam have an excellent resource with guidance on Teaching Controversial Issues, which can be downloaded for free from their website.

The Church of England Education Office's Courageous Advocacy Guide explores the concept of Courageous Advocacy in detail - including its theological underpinning.



This Global Neighbours award-winning school balanced courageous advocacy and political impartiality well. They didn't shy away from thinking about the political aspects of the things they were learning about, or from engaging with the people who had the power to make decisions about them. But the actions were informed by excellent teaching and learning and - crucially - they were pupil-led.

"Each class has a dedicated time each fortnight to discuss what action they want to take as a result of their learning and to evaluate how their campaigns are going. By starting with small plans and actions in Reception and moving onto larger scale endeavours by Year 6, our pupils see themselves as people who can make a difference and they gain confidence in speaking up against injustice. For example:

Year 2 class have been deeply concerned about single use plastic and planned a mixture of letter writing to local shops as well as a visit to Morrisons to meet with the manager to talk about the changes they would like to see.

Our Year 4 pupils discussed their concern about the proposed closure of the local library. They planned and held a meeting outside the library to raise awareness to which they invited the local press and sent a pupil delegation to speak at a county council meeting. famous author got in touch to ask how they could promote the campaign.

As a result of their learning about life in Bangladesh, our Year 6 pupils invited our MP into school for an afternoon to discuss their concern over climate justice."