

Tough subjects become a teaching moment

By Ovetta Wiggins, Washington Post

Just days after a teenager unfurled a Confederate flag at a high school football game in Howard County, Md., teachers began reworking lesson plans to discuss the student's display and the school's decision to discipline him.

Their talking points: What is free speech? How is the action different from the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision that allowed several students to wear black armbands in protest of the Vietnam War? What does the flag represent? Why does it mean such different things to different people?

"It felt like a good time to talk about the issue," said Callie Casper, a government and human geography teacher at River Hill High School. "Some kids wanted to talk about it, sometimes I brought it up."

Teachers across the country routinely must delve into racially sensitive topics such as the display of the Confederate flag and the recent killing of an unarmed black teenager in Ferguson, Mo. They also tackle politically charged subjects such as same-sex marriage and immigration reform. It is a fine line to walk, they say, as they try not to offer their own personal views while provoking critical thinking about the issues everyone is talking – and tweeting – about.

"It is a part of what social studies teachers do. They address topics as they come up naturally through class discussion, related to current events, and as a part of the curriculum," said Mark J. Stout, a curriculum coordinator for the Howard County Public School System. Stout sent an e-mail to social studies teachers in the school district to discuss lesson plans around the Confederate flag incident. Stout included the

school system's policy on teaching controversial issues, the superintendent's statement calling the flag a "powerful symbol of racism, hatred, and unspeakable acts against humanity" and news articles.

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