



WASHINGTON MODEL RESOURCE: **Screening for Biased Content in Instructional Materials**

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PURPOSE AND IMPORTANCE

This is a model screening tool to help school districts comply with Washington state nondiscrimination law that **requires** screening criteria to identify and eliminate bias in all instructional materials as part of any adopted instructional materials policy.

- Textbooks and instructional materials—Instructional materials policy— Elimination of bias [Washington Administrative Code \(WAC\) 392-190- 055](#)

Washington students live in a diverse, vibrant, and inspiring state and country that reflects the complex system of biases and inequities deeply rooted in this country’s history, culture, and institutions. The Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction is committed to equitable and culturally responsive education and classroom materials. Equitable and culturally responsive education and resources uses educational strategies and materials that leverage the various aspects of students’ identities, including the rich cultural, racial, historical, linguistic characteristics of students to provide mirrors that reflect their greatness and windows into the world that allow students to connect across cultures. (adapted from New York City Schools [Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education](#))

As schools strive for equity and culturally responsive educational environments to support all students’ success, it is essential to acknowledge how bias in instructional materials and teaching strategies affects student identity, pride, community, belonging, and empowerment. When certain groups or perspectives are underrepresented or omitted from instructional materials, it can suggest that these groups are less important or valued in society.

This tool encourages school administrators, educators, parents, and community members to consider how instructional materials can better engage students by recognizing and valuing their diverse life experiences.

While this screening tool is designed for reviewing core instructional materials for district adoption, its criteria also support the selection of supplemental and intervention resources. This work should be integrated into broader district and community efforts focused on anti-racism, equity, culturally responsive teaching, and inclusion.



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INSTRUCTIONS FOR USING THIS SCREENING TOOL

Washington state laws outline basic education goals and minimal instructional requirements for school districts. They require districts to have policies and procedures in place that guide the selection and adoption of instructional materials for use in classrooms as well as provide a system for receiving written complaints about materials used by the school district.

An evaluation of content for bias is a required portion of the instructional materials review process.

The following guidance assumes you are conducting a review as part of a larger selection and adoption process. Please refer to the [OSPI Course Design and Instructional Materials Toolkit](#) for more information and helpful resources.

This evaluation tool is a model that provides a strategy for assessing instructional materials for biased content. Using district policies and the professional judgement of your instructional materials review team, it can and should be adapted to meet the needs of the specific content area being reviewed.

Instructional Materials

Instructional materials include all materials designed for use by students and their teachers as learning resources to help students to acquire facts and skills and to develop cognitive processes to meet state learning standards. These resources may be printed or digital, and may include:

- textbooks
- technology-based materials
- educational media
- assessments

For detailed guidance on the entire instructional materials selection and adoption process, including this screening for biased content, visit:

[OSPI Course Design and Instructional Materials Toolkit.](#)



Screening for Biased Content Strategy



Choose material to analyze

Core instructional material can be thousands of pages, so review teams will need to select a few grades, units, and lessons to focus on. If possible, select at least one lower and one upper grade.



Engage review team in professional learning

Committee members must be aware of their own biases and experiences which may influence their choice of instructional materials.

Prior to instructional materials review, training should help staff and instructional materials committee members identify bias.

[Screening for Biased Content Tool – Video Overview](#) | OSPI

[Disrupting Inequity: Having Brave Conversations About Bias](#) | UnboundEd

[Learning for Justice](#) | Southern Poverty Law Center



Prepare for review: understand scoring guidelines and calibrate reviewers

1. Have the review team read the **evaluation tool criteria**, **examples**, and **scoring criteria** - discuss any statement or term that requires additional clarity or deeper understanding. Refer to the [Appendix A: Key Terms](#).
2. Discuss when it is appropriate to choose **not applicable** on the evaluation tool.
3. Calibrate team scoring responses with a sample lesson from a different developer/publisher.

Scoring Instructions

Score	Description	Evidence Required
Met	Criteria are fully satisfied.	Reviewers must provide numerous, specific examples from the instructional materials.
Partially Met	Criteria are somewhat satisfied.	Reviewers should offer some evidence from the materials demonstrating accuracy of the statement.
Not Met	Criteria are not satisfied.	No evidence is found in the instructional materials to support the criteria.
Not Applicable	Criteria do not apply to the instructional materials.	Use when materials intentionally focus on a specific culture or exclude rubric criteria irrelevant to the course; not scored.



Evaluate

Have reviewers complete each section of the tool, marking criteria as **met**, **partially met**, **not met**, or **not applicable**

Remember to provide a rationale for each response based on evidence from the instructional materials.



Interpret results

After responses have been collected, and before final review team group recommendation to the district, use any areas marked as **partially met**, **not met**, or **not applicable** as a launch point for further discussion.

- Were criteria scored similarly among team members? If not, what accounts for the differences in scoring? Use reviewer identified evidence from the instructional materials to inform your discussion.
- Did any new considerations/concerns arise out of this evaluation process?
- Did the items that seem more relevant in your district score higher than others?
- Is additional information required in order to provide an accurate evaluation of the instructional material? If so, who do you contact?



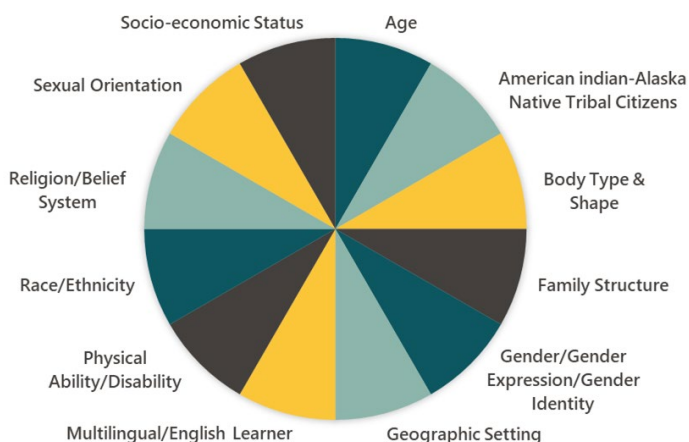
SCREENING TOOL FOR BIASED CONTENT

Title: _____ Developer/Author: _____

Content Area: _____ Grade Band: _____ Year Published: _____

Diversity and Representation

Representation in the instructional material should reflect the rich cultural diversity and lived experiences of all students. Below are some aspects of diversity to consider as you review the criteria in the screening tool.



Include other identifiers of students and families in your community (e.g., military families, students experiencing homelessness, etc.):

Variety of Roles and Character Traits

Criteria	Criteria guidance				Comments and/or examples where criteria are exhibited
	Met	Part Met	Not Met	NA	
Characters/figures central to the instructional material show diverse groups in a variety of roles and occupations.					
different genders and gender identities					
different races/ethnicities/cultures/tribal citizens					
persons with disabilities					
other identifiers important to our district					

Criteria	Met	Part Met	Not Met	NA	Comments and/or examples where criteria are exhibited
When present in the instructional material, character traits such as courage, leadership, intelligence, integrity, etc., are distributed among diverse groups.					
different genders and gender identities					
different race/ethnicities/cultures/tribal citizens					
persons with disabilities					
other identifiers important to our district					
Characters/figures are described by their behaviors, beliefs, and values rather than unnecessary socioeconomic descriptors.					

Multiple Perspectives and Contributions

					Criteria guidance
Criteria	Met	Part Met	Not Met	NA	Comments and/or examples where criteria are exhibited
Biographical, contemporary, or historical materials infuse perspectives and contributions from members of diverse groups substantially, accurately, and respectfully.					
different genders and gender identities					
different races/ethnicities/cultures/tribal citizens					
persons with disabilities					
other identifiers important to our district					
The instructional material presents multiple sides of any controversial and complex issues related to the content area.					
When reviewing and adopting instructional materials for social studies and history, the Since Time Immemorial and tribally-developed curriculum resources (RCW 28A.320.170) are integrated.					

Multicultural Representation

					Criteria guidance
Criteria	Met	Part Met	Not Met	NA	Comments and/or examples where criteria are exhibited
The instructional materials include literature, examples, or situations that accurately reflect the culture, languages, traditions, beliefs, values, and customs of people from diverse backgrounds.					
Any belief systems covered in the instructional materials are presented respectfully, accurately and with appropriate context.					
If belief systems are covered in the instructional materials, multiple belief systems/religions are presented. No one belief system is positioned as superior to others.					

Imagery and Language

					Criteria guidance
Criteria	Met	Part Met	Not Met	NA	Comments and/or examples where criteria are exhibited
The instructional material uses imagery that promotes inclusion and belonging in real-life, contemporary contexts.					
The instructional material provides a range of text, examples, scenarios, and applications relevant to our district students' real-life experiences and cultural backgrounds.					
The curriculum features visually diverse characters, and the characters of color do not all look alike.					
Visual materials include people with disabilities, with various body types, and/or of advanced age.					
Illustrations depict different groups in roles of power and authority.					

Criteria	Met	Part Met	Not Met	NA	Comments and/or examples where criteria are exhibited
All labels or captions of images use inclusive and gender-neutral language and avoid stereotypical descriptions.					
If the images/text in instructional material addresses a stereotype or bias, the historical, social, or cultural context is relevant to contemporary issues.					

Family Representation

					Criteria guidance
Criteria	Met	Part Met	Not Met	NA	Comments and/or examples where criteria are exhibited
When family depiction is present in instructional material, families exhibit a range of configurations in addition to the traditional nuclear family model - single parents, adopted and foster children, stepparents, same-sex parents, and/or relatives living with the family.					
When family references are present in instructional material, examples are sensitive to diversity in family dynamics and student experience of family and home.					

Teacher Guidance

					Criteria guidance
Criteria	Met	Part Met	Not Met	NA	Comments and/or examples where criteria are exhibited
The instructional material provides strategies for teachers to elicit and instructionally respond to their students' prior knowledge, interests, and identities.					
Guidance is provided on opportunities to partner with students' families and caregivers to enhance lessons.					

Additional Considerations

Criteria	Y/N	Comments
Do you have any concerns about author bias? If so, provide evidence in the comments section.		
Do you have any additional concerns about generalizations, stereotypes, or misrepresentations in the instructional material? Please document in comments section.		

Final Recommendations

Criteria	Y/N	Comments
<p>Do you recommend the use of this instructional material from an inclusive and unbiased content perspective?</p> <p><i>Note that this material will also need to meet the quality criteria for Washington State Learning Standards alignment as well as other state statutory requirements and district priority areas.</i></p> <p><i>Promising practices and resources can be found in the OSPI Course Design and Instructional Materials Toolkit.</i></p>		

Name of Evaluator: _____

Signature of Evaluator: _____ Date: _____



CRITERIA DISCUSSION AND EXAMPLES

Variety of Roles and Character Traits

Look for stereotypes. Some stereotypes can be overt – for example, depicting a male Latino teenager as a gang member. Other stereotypes may not be this obvious, look for variations which may demean or exclude characters because of their race, gender, or sexual orientation.

Look for:

- Diverse groups are shown performing similar work in related fields.
- People of different genders and gender identities are depicted in non-traditional as well as traditional roles in the family, at work, and in leisure activities.
- All ethnic groups are portrayed as equally independent/dependent, leaders/subordinates, peaceable/ militant, open/secretive, thoughtful/impulsive etc.
- Characters from all ethnic groups are shown in a variety of settings and lifestyles in active, decision-making and leadership roles.
- Persons with disabilities are referred to by their names and roles rather than their disability.
- Characters of color are main characters and not just sidekicks.
- If there is conflict in the storyline, the characters of color are not mostly considered the problem.
- Characters of color are not assumed to have low income or education.
- Gender is not central to the storyline. Female characters are in a variety of roles that could also be filled by a male character.

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Multiple Perspectives and Contributions

Look for:

- Instructional material features the stories, histories, and narratives of people of color, people of varying economic class, LGBTQ+ people, and females. These portrayals go beyond the cover or pictures in the material and are inclusive in the general formatting of the text.
- The curriculum recognizes the validity and integrity of knowledge systems based in communities of color, American Indian/Alaska Native and indigenous cultures, and faith systems inclusive of but not limited to Christian religions.

Content specific example:

Social Studies

- When reviewing and adopting instructional materials for social studies and history, integrate the Since Time Immemorial and tribally developed curriculum resources (RCW 28A.320.170).
- Recommendations for reviewed instructional material have been brought forward through the tribal consultation process.
- Significant representation of diverse historical figures and cultural groups is infused throughout materials. Tokenism can be very prevalent in state and national history textbooks, which tend to mention indigenous people very sporadically and only in relation to European or Euro-American exploits.

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Multicultural Representation

Classrooms across the country display a vibrant mix of cultures, languages, traditions, and experiences. Instructional materials should reflect this diversity.

Look for:

- Instructional material should respectfully portray different ethnic and cultural traditions, languages, religions, names, and clothing.
- Diverse ethnicities and nationalities are portrayed – not all Asian families are Chinese, not all Latinx families are Mexican, etc.

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Imagery and Language

- Characters of diverse cultural backgrounds are not represented stereotypically or presented as foreign or exotic.
- Groups which include male and females are referred to in neutral languages such as people, mail carriers, firefighters, or legislators.
- Images of American Indian and Alaskan Native peoples include photos and illustrations in contemporary contexts.
- Illustrations of children show them wearing a variety of clothing, colors, and hairstyles, as well as engaging in a variety of activities and play that go beyond traditional gender expectations and roles.
- Oversimplified generalizations about social classes and groups are avoided in text and illustrations.

- People with disabilities, illnesses, different body types, and/or advanced age are portrayed as capable in various ways, rather than portrayed as completely defined by disabilities, age, and illnesses
- Language and imagery in tasks, problems, and case studies includes diverse cultural names and experiences.

Note

Historical and primary documents – including letters, newspaper articles, treaties, journals, photographs, census reports, cartoons, and government documents – reflect the social, political, historical, and cultural contexts in which they were created, including the biases and prejudices. These documents can be used effectively in the classroom to examine the prevalence of certain biases at particular eras in history and to investigate how such views influenced public policies, institutions, and people’s lives. Understanding the development and impacts of historical prejudices and other biases is a critical part of acquiring a more accurate and comprehensive picture of our history and our present circumstance.

[WAC 392-190-055](#) Textbooks and instructional materials—Instructional materials policy—
Elimination of bias

...Nothing in this section is intended to prohibit the use or assignment of supplemental instructional materials, such as classic and contemporary literary works, periodicals, and technical journals, that are educationally necessary or advisable even though they contain bias.

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Family Representation

Look for:

- Extended families are depicted, and emphasis is placed on roles and relationships rather than biological relation.
- People of all backgrounds and experiences are depicted as capable of loving.
- Family assignments are envisioned and explained in a sensitive manner.
 - A seemingly harmless activity, such as creating a family tree, can marginalize students whose biological relations are distant or unknown. Such assignments can be modified to recognize the key relationships in students’ lives.
 - Some students may have family members in the military who may be absent due to deployment

Content specific examples

Sexual Health Education

- Representations of effective and healthy marriage include more than the traditional man and woman model.

- Derogatory and shaming language is avoided in reference to sexual activity
- Students with disabilities are included when discussing romantic relationships and sexual health

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Teacher Guidance

For this section, review team members should review the teacher's materials for the instructional material - this might include both a Teacher's Manual as well as any teacher guidance within the individual units or lesson plans.

Look for:

- Guidance on how to approach, enhance, and customize lessons for their student populations
- When appropriate, the instructional material provides guidance on how to make connections between academic content and the local neighborhood, culture, environment, and resources, including guidance on sources for valid, non-traditional resources (e.g., oral histories) available.
- Diverse student identities are seen as assets and strengths that can advance individual and group learning, rather than seen as challenges or difficulties to be overcome.

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REFERENCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Assessing Learning Materials for Bias | Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (Canada – revised 2013)

[Assessing Visual Materials for Diversity & Inclusivity](#) | Kimberly S. Grotewold (funding from Branch Alliance for Educator Diversity – revised 2020)

[Classroom Library Questionnaire](#) | Lee and Low Books (2017)

Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard | New York University

J. Bryan-Gooden, M. Hester, & L. Q. Peoples (2019). Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard. New York: Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, New York University.

[Instructional Material Design Specifications](#) | OpenSciEd (2018)

[Reading Diversity: A Tool for Selecting Diverse Texts](#) | Teaching Tolerance (2016)

[Social Justice Standards: The Teaching Tolerance Anti-Bias Framework](#) | Teaching Tolerance (2016)

Washington Models for the Evaluation of Bias Content in Instructional Materials (2009)

Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

Acknowledgements

Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

Aira Jackson, English Language Arts and Literacy Director

Arlene Crum, Mathematics Director

Barbara Soots, Open Educational Resources and Instructional Materials Program Manager

Ellen Ebert, Science/Environment and Sustainability Education Director

Jerry Price, Social Studies Program Supervisor

Laura Lynn, Office of Native Education Program Supervisor

Laurie Dils, Sexual Health Education Program Supervisor

Maria Flores, Center for the Improvement of Student Learning Executive Director

Sarah Albertson, Equity and Civil Rights Managing Attorney

Sylvia Reyna, Migrant Education Program Supervisor

Many thanks to the Washington educators, administrators, and community members who provided invaluable review and feedback to this work.

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OSPI EQUITY STATEMENT

The equity statement is an aspirational statement of OSPI's goals that is not binding on local school districts and charter schools — many of which have their own equity statements.

Each student, family, and community possess strengths and cultural knowledge that benefit their peers, educators, and schools. Ensuring educational equity:

- Goes beyond equality; it requires education leaders to examine the ways current policies and practices result in disparate outcomes for our students of color, students living in poverty, students receiving special education and English Learner (English language development) services, students who identify as LGBTQ+, and highly mobile student populations.
- Requires education leaders to develop an understanding of historical contexts; engage students, families, and community representatives as partners in decision-making; and actively dismantle systemic barriers, replacing them with policies and practices that ensure all students have access to the instruction and support they need to succeed in our schools.



Washington Office of Superintendent of
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Key Terms

Note: These definitions are taken from the OSPI Culturally Responsive Language Index, part of the larger [OSPI Style Guide](#).

bias

Prejudice or preference toward a thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way considered to be unfair. Bias can be explicit/conscious or implicit/unconscious.¹

belonging

When one's well-being is considered and one's ability to design and give meaning to society's structures and institutions is realized. More than tolerating and respecting differences, belonging requires that all people are welcome with membership and agency in the society. Belonging is vital to have a thriving and engaged populace, which informs distributive and restorative decisions-making.² See *Othering*.

culture

Encompasses the languages, customs, beliefs, rules, arts, knowledge, and collective identities and memories developed by members of social groups that make their social environments meaningful.³

cultural competency

Cultural competency "includes knowledge of student cultural histories and contexts, as well as family norms and values in different cultures; knowledge and skills in accessing community resources and community and parent outreach; and skills in adapting instruction to students' experiences and identifying cultural contexts for individual students."⁴

¹ Race Forward. (2015, June). [Race reporting guide](#).

² Balajee, S. S. (n.d.) *An evolutionary roadmap for belonging and co-liberation*.

³ American Sociological Association. (n.d.) [Culture](#).

⁴ Washington professional educator standards board—Model standards for cultural competency - [RCW 28A.410.260](#)

culturally responsive teaching

Teaching that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning. Characteristics of culturally responsive teaching include positive perspectives on parents and families; communication of high expectations; learning within the context of culture; student-centered instruction; culturally mediated instruction; reshaping the curriculum; and teacher as facilitator.⁵

ethnicity

A social construct that further divides people into smaller social groups based on characteristics such as a shared sense of group membership, values, behavioral patterns, language, political and economic interests, history, and ancestral geographical base.⁶

ethnocentrism

The attitude that one's own group, ethnicity, or nationality is superior to others.⁷

gender expression

The external ways in which a person expresses their gender identity to the world, such as through their behavior, emotions, style of dress, hairstyle, makeup, interests, or choice of toys, colors, or activities.

gender identity

A person's innate sense of their own gender—whether female, male, both, gender diverse, or other—regardless of assigned sex at birth. The most commonly used terms to describe gender identity include, but are not limited to, the following: cisgender, transgender, nonbinary.

identity

The collective aspect of the set of characteristics by which a thing or person is definitively recognized or known, or the set of behavioral or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group.⁸

⁵ Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: successful teachers of African American children*. Jossey-Bass Publishers

⁶ Omi, M., & Winant, H. (1994). *Racial formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

⁷ Ethnocentrism. In [Merriam-Webster's dictionary](#).

⁸ Schilsky, M. (n.d.). [Social justice standards: Unpacking identity](#). Teaching tolerance.

LGBTQIA+

An acronym used to refer to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning, intersex, and asexual/aromantic/agender communities. The + allows space for other diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression groups. While LGBT and LGBTQ are often used as short-hand umbrella terms meant to capture multiple sexual orientations and gender identities, LGBTQ+ is ideal due to its more inclusive nature.⁹

multiculturalism

Cultural pluralism or diversity (as within a society, an organization, or an educational institution) or as a multicultural social state or a doctrine or policy that promotes or advocates such a state.¹⁰

multilingual/English learners (EL)

Students who are unable to communicate fluently or learn effectively in English, who often come from non-English-speaking homes and backgrounds, and who typically require specialized or modified instruction in both the English language and in their academic courses.¹¹

nonbinary

An adjective that can be used to describe a gender identity that does not fall into one of the two traditional (binary) categories—male or female. It can indicate a gender identity that is something other than male or female, that is neither entirely male nor entirely female, or that blends elements of being male or female.

othering

To view or treat (a person or group of people) as intrinsically different from and alien to oneself. Opposite of belonging.

race

A “social construct without biological meaning”.³¹ What this means in plain English is that rather than being fixed in biology or genetics race is instead understood to be a categorical system created to confer privilege to different groups of people based upon physical appearance (such as skin color), divide people into groups ranked as superior and inferior, and determine which groups are entitled to important legal rights (e.g., citizenship, property rights, voting rights, etc.) in the United States and throughout the world.

⁹ LGBTQIA. In [Merriam-Webster's Dictionary](#).

¹⁰ Multiculturalism. In [Merriam-Webster's dictionary](#).

¹¹ The glossary of education reform. (2013, August 29). [English-language learner](#)

racism

The belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race; a doctrine or political program based on the assumption of racism and designed to execute its principles; a political or social system founded on racism; racial prejudice or discrimination.¹²

Racism is different from racial prejudice, hatred, or discrimination. Racism involves one group having the power to carry out systematic discrimination through the institutional policies and practices of the society and by shaping the cultural beliefs and values that support those racist policies and practices.¹³

sexual orientation

A collection of terms (e.g., straight, bisexual, gay, lesbian, queer, asexual, etc.) used to describe to whom one is emotionally, physically, and/or romantically attracted. Note: Gender identity terms (e.g., cisgender, transgender, nonbinary) are not sexual orientation labels.

stereotypes

False, oversimplified, prejudiced, or exaggerated generalizations about an individual or group.

transgender

An adjective used to describe a person whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth (e.g., someone who was assigned female at birth, but whose gender identity is male).

tribal consultation

Government-to-government relationship building, planning, and agreements between tribal nations, districts, or other educational entities. Tribal consultation is to be meaningful, timely, and ongoing.

tribal sovereignty

Refers to the inherent right of tribal nations to self-govern and ensure tribal lifeways of their citizens, lands, waters, and resources are secure and honored.

¹² Racism. In *Merriam-Webster's dictionary*.

¹³ Dismantling Racism Works Web Workbook. (n.d.). [What is racism?](#)

Appendix B: Applicable Washington State Laws

Primary Statutes

- [RCW 28A.320.230](#) Instructional materials—Instructional materials committee—Complaints
- [RCW 28A.345.130](#) Model policy and procedure for instructional materials—Diverse and inclusive curricula

Statutes Affecting Instructional Materials in Specific Contexts or Subject Areas

- [RCW 28A.320.170](#) Curricula—Tribal history and culture
- [RCW 28A.320.235](#) Supplemental instructional materials—Policies and procedures
- [RCW 28A.300.475](#) Comprehensive Sexual Health Education – Opt-Out Provision

Statutes Linked to Instructional Materials through Nondiscrimination Requirements

- [RCW 28A.640.020](#) Regulations, guidelines to eliminate discrimination
- [RCW 28A.320.233](#) Student materials—Denial based on protected class prohibited—Complaint procedure
- [RCW 28A.642.010](#) Discrimination prohibited—Definitions
- [WAC 392-190-055](#) Textbooks and instructional materials—Inst. materials policy—Elimination of bias

Statutes That Affect Instructional Materials as part of broad school district requirements

- [RCW 28A.150.230](#) District school directors' responsibilities
- [RCW 28A.150.210](#) Basic education—Goals of school districts
- [RCW 28A.150.220](#) Basic education—Minimum instructional requirements—Program accessibility—Rules
- [RCW 28A.415.430](#) Professional learning—Defined—Scope