

LESSON II-2: SACRED BLADE AT HEART OF SCHOOL DISPUTE

Objectives

Students will:

- Gain a deeper appreciation of controversies surrounding the limits of rights in the Bill of Rights.
- Practice mediating a conflict between two “goods”—the right to practice your religion and the right to be safe in school.

Teacher Background

Students often perceive conflicts as being between good and evil or right and wrong. Yet in our democracy, the most difficult conflicts are generally between two goods—two values that many Americans share, such as liberty and security. In this lesson, students grapple with a school-based dilemma in which freedom of religion conflicts with safety; the lesson is based on an actual case in California and is similar to a case that went all the way to the Canadian Supreme Court.

Resources

Student Handout II-2—Sacred Blade at Heart of School Dispute

Procedure

1. Review with students the fact that one right guaranteed by our Constitution is freedom of religion. The Preamble to the Constitution also says that government has the responsibility for insuring “domestic tranquility” (peaceful situation within the country), providing for the “common defense” (safety), and promoting the “general welfare” (helping everyone). Sometimes these goods conflict, and the government has a hard time doing all of these things at once. The following story illustrates this problem. A school principal faces a conflict between allowing students to practice their religion and keeping the school peaceful and safe for everyone. Either read **Student Handout II-2 (Sacred Blade at Heart of School Dispute)** aloud or ask a volunteer to do so.

Adapted from VOICE: Violence-prevention Outcomes in Civic Education, by Carolyn Pereira et al. (Chicago: Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago, 2003).

2. Explain that students will be role-playing a mediation session about this case. Some will represent Rajinder's parents, some other parents in the school, and some the school principal, who is seeking a solution that all will be able to live with. Have students count off from 1 to 5. Students with numbers 1 and 2 should meet together—they represent Rajinder's parents and should try to come up with as many reasons as they can why Rajinder should be allowed to wear his kirpan to school. They should also consider solutions they would agree to. Students with numbers 3 and 4 should also meet together—they represent parents of other students at the school and should try to come up with all the reasons they believe Rajinder should not be able to wear the *kirpan* to school. They should also consider solutions they would agree to. Have group 5, representing the principal, meet to discuss how they can facilitate a productive discussion among the parents. They should come up with a procedure or set of rules that will ensure that they hear both sides. They may also brainstorm alternative solutions that they may propose to the parents. Allow about 10 minutes for students to prepare in their groups.

3. Create new groups of five students; each group should include one student of each number (1, 2, 3, 4, 5). Have students role play the mediation, with the principal as the facilitator. Allow 10 to 15 minutes for the mediation, but keep track of how groups are proceeding so you can end this phase if the students reach an agreement early.

4. If time permits, you may want to ask one group that you observed doing a good job in their mediation to reenact the discussion for the class. You can arrange the class in a fishbowl fashion, with the class doing the mediation in the center and the rest of the class in a circle around them to observe.

5. Have the principals report out on their decisions. Debrief the activity with the class, using such questions as the following:
 - Were all the groups able to reach a decision that everyone could live with? What strategies used by the principals were effective in reaching a decision? Were the parents' attitudes important in determining whether a decision could be reached?
 - Overall did our class seem to value freedom of religion or safety more—or did we value the two equally?
 - What might happen if the school could not reach a decision that satisfied everyone? (*The case might end up in court.*)

You may wish to explain that this role play is based on a 1994 California case. The court ruled that Rajinder had the right to wear the *kirpan*, provided it did not endanger anyone at school. In other cases, school districts have allowed students to wear *kirpans* to school. One school district insisted that the *kirpan* be put in its jacket so that it couldn't be removed and blunted the end of the knife, making it harmless.

Sacred Blade at Heart of School Dispute

Fifth-grader Rajinder Singh Cheema was playing basketball on the school playground. He had the ball and jumped up toward the hoop, aiming for the basket. His shirt slid up. Under his shirt was a small knife strapped to his chest in its case. The school in California had a rule that said no weapons were allowed.

When the principal asked him why he brought the knife to school, Rajinder explained that it was part of his religion. Rajinder is a Sikh, a religion founded in India 500 years ago. About 100,000 Sikhs live in the United States.

The knife (called a *kirpan*) symbolizes the religious duty to help people in need. It is a sacred symbol. When Rajinder was baptized, he was told not to pull it out and never to hurt anyone. The *kirpan*, a curved, dull-edged dagger worn in a case, hangs around Rajinder's neck under his clothing. It is about as sharp as a dull knife.

The principal is in charge of enforcing school rules. The rule says no one may bring a weapon to school. The purpose of the rule is to help keep the school peaceful and safe for everyone. Many parents are worried that their children could be hurt if weapons are allowed in school. They fear that if Rajinder is allowed to wear the *kirpan*, other students will ignore the rule.

Should the principal allow Rajinder to wear his *kirpan*?

Directions

You will take part in a small group discussion of this case. You will represent either Rajinder's parents, parents of other students, or the school principal. To prepare for the discussion, do the following:

- **Rajinder's parents:** Write down reasons why Rajinder should be allowed to wear the *kirpan* to school. Also think about solutions you could agree to.
- **Parents of other students:** Write down reasons Rajinder should not be allowed to wear the *kirpan* to school. Also think about solutions you could agree to.
- **Principals:** Come up with a plan for the discussion. Be sure that you will hear both sides of the argument. Make a list of the things that all of the parents might be able to agree about. Be prepared to lead the discussion and make a decision.

Can a plan be developed to satisfy all of the parents?