



WASHINGTON MODEL RESOURCE: Screening for Biased Content in Instructional Materials

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Important Note:

This is version 1.0 of the updated Washington Models for the Evaluation of Bias Content in Instructional Materials (2009). To create this refreshed document, we drew upon a wide variety of existing resources, collaborators throughout OSPI departments, and expert district and educational service district partners. See [Reference](#) section for details.

OSPI is releasing this model tool for screening for biased content to Washington districts in the hope that it will provide suggestions and examples for this required part of the instructional materials selection and adoption process. We greatly value your feedback about the tool. Below is a link to a survey to provide your input, questions, and suggestions:

[Screening for Biased Content – Tool Feedback](#)

Based on your responses, we will plan on making any revisions to the document in the summer of 2021.

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](#) definition*)

As schools work towards equity, culturally responsive educational communities, and increasing success for all students, it is critical to recognize the impact of bias in instructional materials and teaching strategies on student identity development, pride, sense of community, belonging, and empowerment. Certain groups or perspectives may be underrepresented or not present in instructional materials. The omission or minimization of these groups can imply that they are less important or significant in our society.

We hope that this tool will engage school administrators, educators, parents, and community members in thinking about how instructional materials should engage students by ensuring their diverse life experiences are recognized, acknowledged, and valued.

Though this screening tool is geared toward the review of core instructional material that will be considered for district adoption, the criteria posed should also help guide selection of supplemental and intervention resources. Furthermore, this work should be embedded in larger district and community efforts focusing on anti-racism, equity, culturally responsive teaching practices, and inclusion.



Photo by Allison Shelley for [American Education: Images of Teachers and Students in Action](#) | [CC BY NC](#)

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.](#)

Instructional Materials Review Team Considerations

When selecting and reviewing instructional materials, it is critical to look at materials through different lenses. For guidance on selecting committee members including parents and community members, visit:

[Instructional Materials Adoption – Roles and Responsibilities](#)



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group discussion by Aneeqe Ahmed
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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

[Teaching Tolerance Professional Development Options](#) | Teaching Tolerance



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 [Glossary](#).
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

Met (2)

Reviewers should be able to provide many specific examples from the instructional materials as evidence for the criteria.

Partially Met (1)

Reviewers should be able to provide some evidence from the instructional materials that the statement is accurate.

Not Met (0)

Reviewers are unable to find any evidence from the instructional materials that the criteria are accurate.

Not Applicable (NA – not scored)

There will always be exceptions to these criteria – instructional materials may be focused on a specific culture intentionally or might not incorporate discussion of belief systems since it is not relevant to the course, etc.



Evaluate

Have reviewers complete each section of the tool, marking criteria as “met”, “partially met”, or “not met”.

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 0 or 1 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?



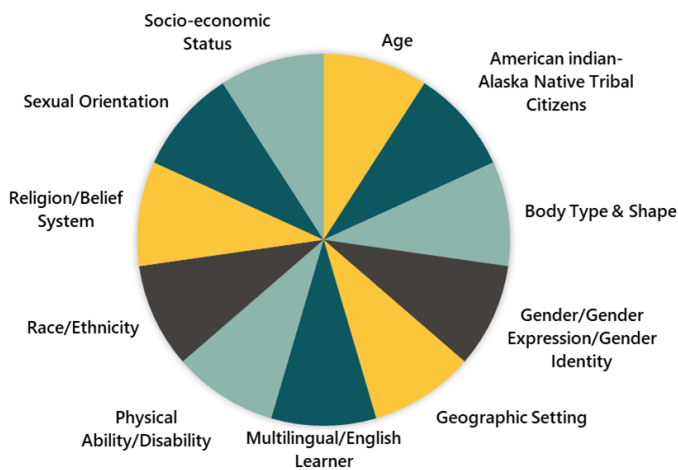
SCREENING TOOL FOR BIASED CONTENT

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 guidance

Criteria	Met 2	Part Met 1	Not Met 0	NA	Comments and/or examples where criteria are exhibited
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					
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					

Criteria	Met 2	Part Met 1	Not Met 0	NA	Comments and/or examples where criteria are exhibited
Characters/figures are described by their behaviors, beliefs, and values rather than unnecessary socioeconomic descriptors.					

Multiple Perspectives and Contributions

Criteria guidance

Criteria	Met 2	Part Met 1	Not Met 0	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 2	Part Met 1	Not Met 0	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 2	Part Met 1	Not Met 0	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.					
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 2	Part Met 1	Not Met 0	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 2	Part Met 1	Not Met 0	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.	Yes No	
Do you have any additional concerns about generalizations, stereotypes or misrepresentations in the instructional material? Please document in comments section.	Yes No	

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>	Yes No	

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) if 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

References

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Skelton, S.M., Kyser, T.S., and Thorius, K.A. (2017). Equity Tool: Assessing Bias In Standards And Curricular Materials. Indianapolis, IN: Great Lakes Equity Center.

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

[Assessing Visual Materials for Diversity & Inclusivity](#) | Branch Alliance for Educator Diversity

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[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

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ATTRIBUTION AND LICENSE

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OSPI EQUITY STATEMENT

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.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Key Terms

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

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

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

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

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

² Balajee, S. S. [An evolutionary roadmap for belonging and co-liberation](#).

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

⁴ Model standards for cultural competency - [RCW 28A.410.260](#)

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](#).

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

LGBTQ+

An acronym used to refer to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer, and questioning 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

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.

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

⁹ Governor's Interagency Council on Health Disparities. (2018). [Equity Language Guide](#).

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

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

Meaningful, timely, ongoing, open and free exchange of information and opinions between the district and tribal representatives inclusive of closest tribal nation(s), American Indian/Alaska Native education program family advisory members and leaders, and other identified parties.

Definitions from OSPI Culturally Responsive Style Guide

¹² Racism. In [Merriam-Webster's dictionary](#).

Appendix B: Applicable Washington State Laws

Basic education – Goals of school districts | [Revised Code of Washington \(RCW\) 28A.150.210](#)

District school directors' responsibilities | [RCW 28A.150.230](#)

Legal requirements for district selection and approval of instructional materials | [Revised Code of Washington \(RCW\) 28A.320.230](#)

Regulations, guidelines to eliminate discrimination | RCW [28A.640.020](#)

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

Curricula—Tribal history and culture | [RCW 28A.320.170](#)