



Something in the Water: Controversial Issues and Competitive Debate

READER'S THEATER SCRIPT

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<http://justiceinschools.org>

Setting	
Memphis, Tennessee, U.S.A.	
Primary Characters	
Narrator	Aaron (large role): Teacher and debate coach
Victoria Lopez (medium role): Teacher and debate coach	Stacy Watson (large role): Teacher and debate coach
Jayla (medium role): Teacher and debate coach	Steve (large role): Teacher and debate coach

This case is set in Memphis, Tennessee, where the Memphis-Shelby County School District serves a student population that is 74% Black, 15.5% Latino, 1% Asian, 7% White with 79% 4-year graduation rate. Like many states around the U.S.A., Tennessee has enacted a law banning educational materials “promoting division” in public schools. Passed in the summer of 2021, the law contains a list of fourteen prohibited concepts that public and charter schools cannot promote through any instructional materials, including the idea that “an individual, by virtue of the individual’s race or sex, is inherently privileged, racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or subconsciously.” It also forbids teaching that “an individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or another form of psychological distress solely because of the individual’s race or sex.”¹ Exactly what materials would be violations under this broad language has proved controversial and confusing to some educators.² The law also established a detailed investigative and legal process initiated by any complaint on the basis of the law. Schools and teachers face harsh penalties for a violation, with schools paying a \$1 million fine for the first violation and up to \$5 million for further violations. Educators risk losing their teaching licenses if found in violation of the law.

Narrator: It was a late afternoon in August when the leadership board of Metro-Memphis Urban Debate League (MMUDL) gathered to make plans for this year’s debate tournament. The national Urban Debate League had released its topic for the year the previous week, along with a comprehensive collection of excerpts from news articles and academic journals. The packets were curated by the national association specifically to help middle school and novice debaters prepare their speeches. By centralizing and norming the evidence sources, the

packets helped ensure consistent background research among debaters competing across states or advancing to nationals. The MMUDL leadership board was responsible for coordinating and training all Memphis-area coaches, setting the local debate tournament schedule, and ensuring compliance with relevant regulations.

Victoria: Sorry I'm late!

Jayla: No worries, Victoria, we know how it is.

Aaron: I had an LSAT prep session run long and just walked in myself, it's good to see you two again.

Steve: Victoria— we just finished sharing the resolution for this year's Policy Division: "*The United States federal government should substantially increase its protection of water resources in the United States.*"

Victoria: Don't you teach about water resources in your science class, Aaron?

Aaron: I sure do. However, these packets go above and beyond the state standards. One is about lead contamination in the water supply. Lead pipes are a problem right here in Memphis.

Victoria: It's nice to have a relevant topic.

Aaron: Yeah, the lead packet is refreshing, but the other packet is just about agriculture runoff.

Jayla: I don't see how we're going to make the kids care about that. You don't think about farmland regulations as a teenager in the city.

Stacy (*gently correcting*): I think our students will know a lot about growing food. Plenty of folks in Memphis have family connections in rural Mississippi or Arkansas.

Jayla: I'd never thought about that!

Stacy (*in a motherly tone*): Well, y'all aren't from Memphis, are you? I'm looking forward to having my students connect with their grandparents and relatives about farming life— it'll be good for them.

Victoria: No matter what, it sounds like our kids are more connected to either topic than last year's debate.

Aaron: I've already seen the light bulbs flickering. There's a site with an interactive map of the city's lead service lines. (*with growing excitement*) You can enter any address in Memphis and see the most recent lead test results. I gave a presentation on lead's effect on the brain and nervous system, then I pulled the map up on the projector— my debaters were eager to check their addresses.

Stacy (*with concern*): Did you type in their addresses?

Aaron: Of course! Unfortunately, most of them showed positive for lead. Then we zoomed out on the map and started talking about environmental racism. The newer white suburbs had no lead whatsoever, whereas the older inner-city neighborhoods all did. (*with pride*) At the end of practice, I had everyone generate questions that we'll use to guide our research next week.

Stacy: Do you think you're going to be able to answer all those questions?

Aaron: Oh no, but they're fired up about it. A few 8th graders were talking about emailing the mayor or the news! An English teacher told me a few students were flipping through the packet during free reading time.

Jayla: See, when you connect things to the real world—

Stacy: That experience could fill students with hopelessness and anxiety. If you have them scared of their tap water, how are they going to focus at school? It's not a problem they can solve as children, so in that lesson, they're just victims. Framing a topic that way makes a *debate* too emotional and distracting for the classroom and I don't think—

Steve: Sorry to interrupt, but we all just got an email from the district. They're pulling the lead contamination packet. It contains material not approved for Tennessee.

Jayla: What?! How can they do that? It's the national debate league's materials—all the novice debaters in the country are using it.

Steve: I wouldn't be surprised if more places followed suit... we're not the only state that's banned Critical Race Theory.

Aaron: Critical Race Theory?? This is science!

Jayla: What exactly does the email say?

Steve: *“I’m sure you’re familiar with the law recently signed by Governor Lee that adds restrictions on curriculum. Instructional material must be totally impartial and non-controversial. With such serious consequences for even a single complaint, we’re being extra careful. Debate is a district-sponsored program, and we found the lead pollution packet, which repeatedly expanded on the concept of “environmental racism,” is likely to put the program at risk for a complaint. MMUDL is directed not to use the lead contamination packet at tournaments this year.”*

Victoria: What are we going to tell the coaches?

Steve: What do you mean? We’ll just forward them the email. What else would we do?

Aaron: As the leadership board, we can take a stand. I say we host the first tournament with the lead packet. If the district wants to say that evidence from academic journals and newspaper articles is ‘illegal,’ they can explain it to the media and embarrass themselves.

Victoria: That sounds like we’re asking for trouble.

Steve: More like breaking the law.

Jayla: How is raising awareness about environmental racism breaking the law?

Steve: I’m not trying to get political here, but none of us are getting paid to *raise awareness*. Teachers should only have to teach the facts, not theories or opinions.

Aaron: Steve, respectfully, isn’t omitting the discussion of racism a political choice? What am I supposed to tell my students about why we’re not using the lead packet anymore?

Steve: You’re the adult—you don’t have to explain yourself.

Stacy: I can see why we wouldn’t want to taint students’ debate experience with political controversy. I’d probably say ‘It’s the state’s rules, not mine.’ There are other ways to teach about pollution.

Jayla: Wait, I’ve just been looking this up. The law says biased or divisive materials can be used if they are balanced with a viewpoint from the opposing side. That’s what we do at debate tournaments. People can hardly say we’re pushing one narrative!

Steve: That's exactly why we *can't* use the packet. It doesn't give multiple perspectives. The debate offers different solutions to one problem: environmental racism.

Jayla: That's because there is no valid 'other side' when it comes to racism. The district should recognize that it is *more* controversial to pretend that it's a coincidence that Black and Brown communities are more burdened with pollution.

Aaron: Exactly. No one's challenged the packet yet, but if they do we should defend its value.

Victoria: While it's a shame that anyone would go so far as to file a complaint against that packet I can see it happening. That puts us *all* at risk.

Jayla: Maybe we can distribute the packet as *optional*. If teams want to debate with it, they can do so – outside of league tournaments. I mean, Aaron's students could see their own homes on the lead contamination map. I can't accept that it's "too risky" to share stories from people who could be our students.

Victoria: I could be willing to take that risk for myself, but what about all the coaches not on this board? The district is asking us to play it safe for them. All it takes is for one parent to complain.

Stacy: And that parent doesn't even have to win their case. As soon as a complaint happens there's going to be lawyers involved... staff put on leave... media attention. If the board considers the debate league a lightning rod for controversy, they will cut our funding.

Aaron (*passionately*): Parents will use this law to file complaints no matter what we do. Let's use this opportunity to show our kids how to take a stand. They can learn and grow through civic advocacy.

Steve: Excuse me, *take a stand* against who?

Jayla: I agree the kids should get to read the evidence... but we don't have to make this a protest. We can just share the packet and let the coaches make their own decisions.

Steve: We can't send coaches instructional materials that violate the law.

Aaron: The district didn't say this packet actually violates the law. The issue is not what we *can* do – it's what we're willing to do.

Steve: We're lucky the district is playing it safe, for everyone's sake. We should play it safe too.

Victoria: I don't know if the packet violates the law. Maybe it doesn't. But I'm uncomfortable going against the district's orders. Maybe if we ask first it could be better for our professional relationship.

Aaron: Think big picture! Refusing the district's ban could lead to real change. Maybe if students protested, posted on social media, or wrote to officials, something would be done. Justice... advocacy. That is exactly what education should be about! Frankly, that's what my debate program is about.

Steve: Do you hear yourself? This is what this law is designed to prevent. We're here to be teachers—not activists.

Stacy: I don't think there's anything wrong with being an activist as an adult. But these are students. I coach debate because it makes them readers, speakers, and thinkers. Let's focus on that.

Aaron: Kids in other states are going to learn about environmental racism. They'll ask our team about it during cross-examination at Nationals. Doesn't that seem unfair to you?

Stacy: Of course it's unfair. But what I care about more than nationals is a debate league. Besides chess, it's the only non-athletic after-school activity our district funds. If we undermine their directions, the next decision could be to stop our funding. This debate league is something I don't want our kids to lose.

Victoria: Yeah, and we don't want to lose our jobs, or our teaching licenses!

Aaron: We don't know that's what will happen.

Jayla: I don't know where playing it safe ends. Out of the same care that you have for our community, Stacy, I'm willing to find a way to give students in Memphis access to this packet.

Victoria: It's getting late, and our coaches will be looking for these evidence packets tomorrow. What should we do?

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