

Instruction

SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION IN THE INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM

The Board acknowledges the importance of religion to the understanding of society and the richness of the human experience. The District will be guided by three concepts when making decisions about the appropriateness of activities for inclusion in the school program: the activity should have a secular purpose, the activity should neither advance nor inhibit religion, and the activity must not foster an excessive entanglement of government with religion.

Nurturing the development of knowledge and respect for the rights of all cultural and religious groups is a continuing goal of the District. Students, faculty, and administration are reminded of the pluralism of religious beliefs and are urged to be conscious of and respect the sensitivity of others.

Opportunities to learn about cultural and religious traditions should be provided within the framework of the curriculum. Information about religious and cultural holidays and traditions focusing on how and when they are celebrated, their origins, and their histories should be part of this instruction. This educational opportunity should be handled with great care, sensitivity, and respect for the feelings and beliefs of individuals.

An environment should be created and encouraged where students of various ethnic backgrounds feel comfortable in sharing comments about their religious and cultural traditions. No student should be singled out to share or participate in discussions solely on the basis of that student's identification with the cultural or religious heritage being addressed. A student's preference not to share or participate in these discussions should be honored and respected without penalty.

Teaching About and/or References to Religion

The U.S. Supreme Court has stated (in Abington v. Schempp and Murray v. Curtlett) that education without the study of religion is incomplete and that such study is not prohibited by the First Amendment. The following statements distill the essence of the Court's decisions as to what constitutes legal and illegal religion studies in the public schools:

- a) The school may sponsor the study of religion, but may not sponsor the practice of religion.
- b) The school may expose students to all religious views, but may not impose any particular view.
- c) The school's approach to religion is one of instruction, not one of indoctrination.
- d) The function of the school is to educate about all religions, not to convert to any one religion.
- e) The school's approach to religion is academic not devotional.
- f) The school should study what all people believe, but should not teach a pupil what he/she should believe.

(Continued)

Instruction

SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION IN THE INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM (Cont'd.)

- g) The school should strive for student awareness of all religions, but should not press for student acceptance of any one religion.
- h) The school should seek to inform the student about various beliefs, but should not seek to conform him to any one belief.

“Public Education Religion Studies: Questions and Answers.” Public Education Religion Studies Center, Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio, Copyright, 1974.

Religious influences and practices are a part of literature and history and, as such, can and should be an appropriate subject of study. Teachers may emphasize moral and ethical principles of religions, and may provide information and the opportunity for students to study the forms and practices of various religions, and the various printed documents that embody the beliefs of different religions. However, any such activity should present information about religions and shall not teach or seek to establish these beliefs.

In accordance with the New York State Curriculum in the Social Studies, students when exposed to information concerning religions and religious beliefs, will not be subjected to an advocacy, either openly or covertly, or by subtlety, of a particular religion or of religious beliefs.

School Activities Related to Religious Holidays or Themes

School activities related to the teaching about religious holidays or themes must be consistent with, and representative of, the District's curriculum.

In planning school activities related to the teaching about religious holidays or themes, special effort must be made to ensure that the activity is not devotional and that students of all faiths can join without feeling they are betraying their own beliefs. Similarly, age appropriate activities are encouraged within the framework of the curriculum. Teaching about religious and cultural holidays may include activities such as parties and special foods, if they reinforce educational goals.

Symbols in the Schools

The purpose of using religious symbols should be to teach about religious concepts and traditions, and to convey historical or cultural content, not to promote or celebrate religious concepts, events, or holidays.

Music in the Schools

The purpose of using religious music should be to teach musical concepts, to convey historical and cultural content, or to create aesthetic experiences in a setting which emphasizes artistic expression and educational value, not to promote or celebrate a religious faith.

(Continued)

SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION IN THE INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM (Cont'd.)**Curriculum Areas in Conflict with Religious Beliefs**

Students will be given the option to be excused from participating in those parts of an activity, program, or area of instruction involving a religious theme which conflicts with their own religious beliefs or that of their parents or guardians in accordance with applicable law and regulations. Alternatives may be provided that are of comparable instructional value.

The District will make this policy available in order to ensure community, faculty, student, and parental or guardian awareness.

United States Constitution, First Amendment

Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015

Equal Access Act, 20 USC §§ 4071-4074

Education Law §§ 1609(9), 1609(10), 1709(1), 1709(3), 3204(5), and 3210

8 NYCRR §§ 16.2 and 109.2

NOTE: Refer also to Policies #7460 -- Constitutionally Protected Prayer in the Public Schools
#8330 -- Objection to Instructional Materials and Controversial Issues