

Lower Merion School District

Policy No.: 130
Section: PROGRAMS
Title: GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGION
Date Adopted: 10/73
Date Last Revised: 12/21/15; 4/25/11

130 GUIDELINES CONCERNING RELIGION

Purpose

Religions have significantly affected the history, ideas and institutions of our society. We recognize that public school teachers will therefore find it necessary, useful and appropriate to include references to the doctrines or tenets of faith groups when these are intrinsic to the subject matter being studied.

As educational centers, the public schools have the basic responsibility to develop in students an understanding of their diverse history and culture and the significance of religion in that history and culture. They also have the responsibility to teach understanding of and respect for group differences in our society including religious differences. In fulfilling these responsibilities the teaching must be objective, avoid any doctrinal impact, and clearly demonstrate religious doctrines do not have the support of state authority. Such teaching must be fair and must expose a recognition of and respect for the variety and richness of mankind's beliefs. The content and manner of presentation should be oriented toward the education of children in the light of the historic, literary, and cultural traditions represented in the world's societies.

Further, it is the policy of the District not to prevent, or otherwise deny participation in, constitutionally protected prayer in the District's schools, consistent with guidance issued by the U.S. Department of Education and applicable judicial decisions interpreting the religion clauses of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. This policy supersedes any other District policy that is inconsistent with it.

In order to accomplish these ends, the following guidelines should be observed in all classrooms and schools within the Lower Merion School District:

General Guidelines:

1. The public schools should show no preference for one religion over another or non-religion and refrain from the promotion of any and all religions. There should be no inculcation of sectarianism in the school through religious services, observances, or participation in liturgical rituals, such as prayers or songs connoting an affirmation of faith.
2. Any dramatic or musical displays and activities in art or music, regardless of the season, must be determined by their educational function and must avoid the atmosphere of a religious ceremony or observance. This depends on the sensitivity, understanding and good judgment of the teacher.

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3. Care should be exercised to avoid indoctrination through exhibits of religious artifacts and symbols. The meaning of religious holidays may be explained through the use of religious symbols.
4. Whatever the circumstances, students should be able freely and comfortably to refrain from participation in any program in the context of the guidelines without either direct or subtle pressures upon them.
5. Care should be taken by athletic coaches and activity sponsors not to directly or indirectly pressure students to prioritize sport or activity participation over religious observances. Students and families should feel encouraged to direct their concerns to the building principal or other building administrator without fear of reprisals or other adverse consequences.
6. Avoiding Scheduling Conflicts with Religious Holidays
 - a. In order to avoid scheduling conflicts between our schools and religious life in the community, calendars which denote religious holidays and other observances shall be consulted by teachers, administrators and other applicable personnel in planning the instructional program and school activities.
 - b. Major examinations should not be scheduled when a significant number of student absences are anticipated due to religious holidays. In areas such as lesson planning (tests, introduction of new units), extra-curricular sports, special programs (music, drama, etc.), and elective classes, the dates of religious holidays and other observances, including weekly observances, should be taken into account.
 - c. In any event, any absence in observance of religious holidays is considered excused and there shall be no academic penalty or non-academic deprivation for non-participation in activities resulting from the students' observation of religious holidays and other observances, including weekly observances.

Religious Services

Formal religious services will not be sponsored by the School District either on or off the school properties.

Study About Religions

The study about religions of the world is an essential part of the curriculum of the schools. In the words of the Supreme Court of the United States of America, "it might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization."

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The Library Media Centers of the school system are expected to contain the religious documents common to the religion being studied as a part of the courses taught at the various age and grade levels of the schools.

It shall be the duty of the teachers of the school system to maintain a climate of “neutrality” within the classrooms at all times, and to be particularly alert to the need for sympathetic appreciation of the different religious backgrounds and orientation of the students of the classes and of the School District.

The students are to be cautioned that the public schools are neutral and that any occasion of school attendance and class study of religion is not to be used for the forwarding of personal religious beliefs other than through the demonstration and continued practice of the highest moral and ethical conduct.

Religious Expressions and Ceremonies

Religious expressions in music, art, and holidays common to the people of the Lower Merion School District are a vital part of our cultural heritage, and their use in the school program as part of our American heritage is not to be eliminated. It is expected that musical compositions chosen to be sung by students in music classes and for public concerts will be selected on the basis of their musical merits. Artistic compositions will be studied and prepared as a part of the regular Art Curriculum irrespective of any religious connotations.

The great religious holidays and festive seasons are a part of our entire community and cultural structure. The schools will continue to study about these occasions in their programs and classroom activities. It is the responsibility of the teachers to appreciate the differences in the religious backgrounds of the students in their charge and to exercise good judgment in maintaining a spirit of acceptance of religious differences among the students, while at the same time pointing out in the class work the significances of the religious holidays and celebrations for those whose religious faith support these events.

It is not the intention of this policy to remove the schools from the social and cultural life of the community. Great events in the lives of its pupils will be marked with significant celebrations. It is the task of the school administration and teachers to exercise good judgment and a sense of fair play so as not to offend the sensibilities of those of differing creeds and religious beliefs.

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Delegation of Responsibility

In order to make sure that District personnel do not impose obligations and requirements on students that unduly conflict with student religious observances, the Superintendent shall establish regulations in order to implement these guidelines which shall include, but not be limited to, ensuring that District personnel, as identified in the accompanying Administrative Regulation, are aware of this policy, including but not limited to the nature and dates of religious observances.