

RELIGION

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Purpose

To articulate issues of religion within the school and classroom setting.

Recognition of Religious Beliefs and Customs

(The District will adhere to Federal and State regulations pertaining to religious observances in public schools.)

No religious belief or non-belief shall be promoted, or disparaged, by the District. Instead, the District encourages all students and staff members to appreciate and be tolerant of the religious views of others. The District shall foster understanding and mutual respect regarding culture, economic backgrounds, and religious beliefs. In this spirit of tolerance, students and staff shall be excused from participating in practices that will impose a significant burden on the exercise of their religious beliefs.

The District recognizes the educational goals of advancing student knowledge and appreciation of the role our religious heritage has played in the social, cultural, and historical development of civilization.

Religious Holidays

The District will:

Explain the origin, and the historical and contemporary significance, of religious holidays in an unbiased and objective manner without sectarian indoctrination. The District may permit teaching about religious and cultural holidays (Christmas, for example) in the context of teaching about other religious and cultural holidays (such as Hanukkah, Kwanzaa and Ramadan), so as to provide instruction on religious heritage and particular holidays where it is clear the District is not endorsing or encouraging a religious belief.

Permit music, art, literature, and drama having religious themes or bases as part of the curriculum for school-sponsored activities and programs if presented in a prudent and objective manner, as a traditional part of the cultural and religious heritage of the particular holiday, and in a manner where it is clear the District is not endorsing or encouraging a religious belief. The District or any school within the District shall use non-restrictive terms to designate school-sponsored activities or programs involving student participation.

Permit the use of religious symbols such as a cross, menorah, star and crescent, Star of David, crèche, symbols of Native American religions, or other symbols that are a part of a religious holiday (including, but not limited to Christmas, Easter, Passover, Hanukkah, St. Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day, Thanksgiving, and Halloween) as a teaching aid or resource provided such symbols are displayed as an example of the cultural and religious heritage of the holiday and are temporary in nature.

Prepare the District's official calendar so as to minimize conflicts with religious holidays, which result in the absences of so many students that the educational process is disrupted.

Religion in the Curriculum

Religious institutions and orientations are central to human experience. An education excluding such a significant aspect of human experience is incomplete. It is essential that the teaching about—and not of—religion be conducted in a factual, objective, and respectful manner.

The District will:

Refer to the religious influence of literature, music and drama in the arts curriculum and in school activities only to the extent such references are essential to a complete understanding of the learning experience in such fields of study.

Refer to religious themes in the arts, literature, and history only to the extent necessary for a balanced and comprehensive study of these areas. Such references should never foster or advance any particular religious tenets, or demean any religious beliefs.

Accommodate student-initiated expressions to questions or assignments, which reflect student beliefs or non-beliefs about a religious theme. For example, students are free to express religious belief, including belief in the tenets of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or other religious faith, or non-belief, in compositions, art forms, music, speech, and debate.

Equal Access Act

The Equal Access Act ("the Act") provides that a public secondary school which permits one or more non-curriculum related student groups (any student group whose activities are not directly related to a course offered by the school) to meet on school premises during non-instructional times is prohibited from discriminating against students who wish to conduct a meeting on the basis of the "religious, political, philosophical, or other content of the speech at such meetings." Although the Equal Access Act applies specifically to public secondary schools, the District will apply the Equal Access Act provisions to all district schools.

The District permits non-curriculum related student groups to meet on school premises during non-instructional times.

Non-instructional time includes time during the school day when students are required to be in school, but not in a particular class (e.g. lunch).

The following limitations apply to meetings:

The District retains authority to prohibit meetings that would materially and substantially interfere with the orderly conduct of educational activities within the school.

In order to protect the well-being of all persons present, the District retains authority to maintain order and discipline on the school premises.

Staff monitors may not participate in any religious meetings and the Act prohibits school sponsorship of any religious meetings. This means that school officials may not promote, lead, or participate in any such meetings. The assignment of a teacher, administrator, or other school employee to any meeting is limited to oversight and is merely to insure order and good behavior.

The Act provides that non-school persons may not direct, control, or regularly attend activities of student groups. The meetings of any such religious groups must be voluntary and student-initiated. If such meetings are conducted and controlled by non-school personnel, the District will refuse to permit the meetings. If non-school personnel regularly attend the activities of such a group, the group enjoys no protection under the Act.

School Sponsorship

The District will not sponsor a religious club. The District will treat all non-curriculum related student groups in a manner that is viewpoint neutral. Religious and non-religious student groups are entitled to the same access to the school newspaper, bulletin boards, and the public address system.

Accommodation of Prayer During Instructional Time

The District may excuse students from class to remove a significant burden on their religious exercise, where doing so would not impose material burdens on other students. For example, the District may excuse Muslim students from class to enable them to fulfill their religious obligations to pray during Ramadan.

Moments of Silence

If a school has a “moment of silence” or other quiet period during the school day, students are free to pray silently, or not to pray, during these periods of time. Teachers and other school employees may neither encourage or discourage students from praying during such time periods.

Student Prayer During Instructional Time

Students may pray when not engaged in school activities or instruction, subject to the same rules designed to prevent material disruption of the education program that are applied to other privately initiated expressive activities. Among other things, students may read religious texts, pray before meals, and pray or study religious materials with fellow students during recess, the lunch hour, or other noninstructional time to the same extent that they may engage in nonreligious activities. School authorities may impose rules of order and educational restriction on student activities including student prayer and religious expression, and they may prohibit students from proselytizing, or taking action to convert other students, or to derogate or otherwise disparage particular faiths or beliefs. However, teachers may not discriminate against student prayer or religious speech in applying any rules of order or educational restrictions.

Released Time for Religious Instruction

Absence of a student during school hours for religious education outside school property may be allowed provided the student's parent or guardian completes and submits a Religious Instruction Form (Exhibit I - IN.1-B) to the principal, and the instruction meets the following requirements:

The religious instruction must be under the sponsorship of a recognized religious body or group. Students must be registered for the course, and file a copy of the registration with the principal who may periodically request student's attendance reports from the course's sponsors.

Absence for religious instruction may not exceed one hour per week, at a time set by the District.

Religious Expression and Prayer in Class Assignments

Students may express their beliefs about religion in homework, artwork, and other written and oral assignments free from discrimination based on the religious content of their submissions. Such work shall be judged by ordinary educational concerns identified by the school. Such work shall not be displayed, or presented to other students, in a manner that suggests District endorsement of religious beliefs.

Prayer by District Employees

When acting in their official capacities as representatives of the state, District staff are prohibited from encouraging or discouraging prayer, and from participating in such activity with students. Staff may, however, take part in religious activities where the overall context is clear that they are not participating in their official capacities. Before school or during lunch, for example, staff may meet privately with other staff for prayer or Bible study to the same extent that they may engage in other conversation or nonreligious activities. Similarly, staff may participate in their personal capacities in privately sponsored baccalaureate ceremonies.

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