



PRESENTS

POLICY HIGHLIGHTS

November 25, 2025

Observance of Religious Holidays in the Public Schools

The rapidly approaching holiday season often raises the question of how the various religious holidays can or should be recognized in schools. School populations are increasingly more diverse. The multitude of religions and beliefs present in public schools provides an opportunity to teach, through modern holiday celebrations, not only about history and other cultures, but also about mutual respect, citizenship, tolerance, and peace.

Board policy should provide guidance on the role of religion in schools, not only regarding holiday observance but also other religion-related issues. The issue of religion in the schools remains a subject often marked by confusion and conflict. Board policy, grounded in law and judicial decisions, can clarify the district's approach and offer an opportunity for cooperation on what could be an extremely emotional issue for the community.

The law provides some guidelines for practice and sound policy. Policies and guidelines about the role of religion in the schools should be based on the constitutional guarantee of religious liberty expressed in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Public schools may neither promote nor inhibit religious belief or non-belief. Schools, as governmental bodies, must remain neutral among religions and between religion and non-religion. Governmental action must have a secular purpose, must not have a primary effect of advancing or inhibiting religion, and must not cause excessive entanglement between religion and government. A school, with respect to the Free Speech Clause, cannot discriminate against speech based on the viewpoint of the speaker; however, the courts have distinguished between the religious speech of a private individual, which is protected by the Free Speech Clause, and government-sponsored or endorsed speech, which is prohibited by the Establishment Clause.

Within the current legal framework, school districts must make many practical decisions regarding religious holidays and related issues. Such policies and decisions must demonstrate sensitivity to the needs of all students and a willingness to provide a course between avoiding all references to religion on the one hand and promoting religion on the other.

The adoption of policies governing religious activities in schools is recommended. Such policies impact instruction, facility use, curriculum, graduation activities, staff and student attendance. Many samples are available, upon request, from CABE. This "Policy Highlight" review focuses on religious holidays and how the law affects policy direction, given the time of year.

The study of religious holidays may be included in the curriculum as opportunities for teaching about religions. Such study serves the academic goals of educating students about history and cultures, as well as the traditions of particular religions within a pluralistic society. At the elementary level, natural opportunities arise to discuss religious holidays while studying different cultures and communities. At the secondary level, students of world history or literature have opportunities to consider various holy days and religious holidays.

However, teachers must be alert to the distinction between teaching about religious holidays, which is permissible, and celebrating religious holidays, which is not. Recognition of and information about holidays may focus on how and when they are celebrated, their origins, histories, and the generally agreed-upon meanings. An objective and sensitive approach, neither promoting nor inhibiting religion, can foster understanding and mutual respect for differences in belief. Teachers must not use the study of religious holidays as an opportunity to proselytize or to inject personal religious beliefs into the discussions. Activities that clearly promote a particular religious faith should not be permitted in the schools. However, school events that involve music and other activities related to various religious faiths, without proselytizing, are permissible.

The display of religious symbols in the school setting is a common concern. The use of religious symbols, used only as examples of cultural and religious heritage, is permissible as a teaching aid or resource. Religious symbols may be displayed only temporarily as part of the academic program. Students may choose to create artwork with religious symbols, but teachers should not assign or suggest such creations.

Religious symbols are not permissible seasonal decorations. Religious decorations are prohibited year-round. The question is often raised about religious symbols that have become secular. The Supreme Court has held that Christmas trees and a Hanukkah menorah, in some instances, have become secular symbols of the winter holiday season that, when displayed by a public entity, may not constitute an Establishment Clause violation. However, it is not at all clear that such displays are permitted in public schools. The Court has noted that, “when located in a public school, such a display might raise additional considerations.” In 2006, the Second Circuit, which includes Connecticut, ruled on a New York City schools policy that permits the display of Christmas trees, a menorah, and a star and crescent as “secular” symbols. The Court held that the display of these items served the dual secular purposes of celebrating holidays and promoting greater understanding of cultural and religious differences.

Moreover, religious music may be sung or played as part of academic music study. School concerts that present a variety of selections may include religious music. However, concerts should avoid programs dominated by religious music, especially when these coincide with a particular religious holiday. The overall effect must not endorse religion and must relate to secular educational goals. Students should be excused from participation upon request. The use of art, drama, or literature with religious themes is also permissible if it serves a sound educational goal in the curriculum, but not if used as a vehicle for promoting religious belief.

At this time of year, especially in the coming month of December, questions are often raised about religion in schools. Decisions about what to do at this time of year should begin with the understanding that public schools may not sponsor religious devotions or celebrations. Holiday programs should be devised that serve an educational purpose for all students. Such programs should not make any student feel excluded or identified with a religion not their own. In short, while recognizing the holiday season, none of the December school activities should have the purpose of promoting or inhibiting religion.

In determining whether a particular celebration, song, decoration, or display violates the Constitution, the administration and staff should consider the following questions. To be constitutional, an affirmative answer is required for each:

1. Does the governmental action have a bona fide secular or civic purpose?
2. Does the primary effect neither advance nor inhibit religion, i.e., is it neutral toward both religion and non-religion?
3. Does the governmental action avoid excessive entanglement with religion?

The Eight Circuit of Appeals in 1980 decided an important case on this subject, holding that the curriculum can include discussion of holidays having both religious and secular significance, and that the study of these holidays could include religious symbols and religious music “in a prudent and objective manner and as a traditional part of the cultural and religious heritage of a particular holiday.” (*Flore v. Sioux Falls School District*).

In summary, public schools can observe, not celebrate religious holidays, which have a cultural or secular component, as well as a religious significance. Teaching about religion is permissible; celebrating religious holidays is not. Schools can teach students about Christmas and have students participate in the holiday's cultural traditions. The use of religious symbols is permissible as a teaching aid or resource, provided they are used only as examples of cultural or religious heritage. Religious symbols may be displayed only temporarily as part of the academic lesson being studied.

Holiday concerts in December may appropriately include music related to Christmas, Hanukkah, and other religious traditions, but religious music should not dominate. Balance is key, or there may be a perception that the school is sponsoring or favoring a particular religion over others. While recognizing the holiday season, none of the school activities in December should have the purpose or effect of promoting or inhibiting religion. However, activities that clearly promote a particular religious faith are not permitted.

However, it is also true that holiday traditions have become a part of our culture. It is not always easy to draw the line. School events that involve music and other activities related to various religious faiths, without proselytizing on behalf of any, will be appropriate under the First Amendment.”

Public school teachers do not have the same breadth of academic freedom as university professors, due in large part to the age of the students and to compulsory school attendance laws, which create a captive audience for teachers. Teachers speak on behalf of the school, so they should not use their position to promote outside religious activities or otherwise promote or denigrate religion while fulfilling their teaching roles.

Careful planning that complies with board policies can result in happy holidays free of legal challenges.

Policy Implications: CABE policy [#6115.2](#), “Religious Observances and Displays,” provides guidance on this issue and is available upon request from the CABE Policy Department. In addition, policy [#6141.2](#), “Separation of Church and State,” also provides guidance on this issue. This policy is available in the Core Policy Manual, accessible on the CABE website in the member section.

Other Holiday Season Issues with Policy Direction: Other issues occur at this time of year, for which policy can guide the appropriate approach. One issue pertains to ethics. Years ago, a student might have given a teacher a piece of fruit as a holiday gift. However, in our current society, gifts are increasingly elaborate and may pose ethical problems. It could be inferred, based on the gift, that it was given to influence the recipient in the performance of their duties. Therefore, it is a good idea to review the district's ethics policy on accepting gifts.

The policies to consider are:

- [#0050](#) – Code of Ethics
- [#4118.22/4218.22](#) – Code of Ethics (Personnel)
- [#9271](#) – Code of Ethics (Board of Education)
- [#1313](#) – Gifts to School Personnel

Another concern at this time of year is student attendance. Research supports the view that school attendance is an essential component of school success. Therefore, it's undesirable to see an increase in absenteeism the week before and after the holiday school vacation period.

Use policy to promote a culture of regular school attendance. Remind students and parents/guardians of the district's attendance policy during this holiday season. Policy [#5113](#), "Attendance," addresses school attendance and the requirements for chronic absenteeism. The policy should be sensitive to religious observances and permit a reasonable number of excused absences to observe religious holidays.

Student wellness can also come into play at this time of year. The season includes parties, celebrations, and gatherings with food. It is important to review the school wellness policy, [#6142.101](#), and its corresponding regulation for guidance on foods provided but not sold in the school setting. This is another opportunity to remind the school community about the guidelines. The staff should be reminded that in-school holiday-season celebrations should center on non-food activities or serve only foods and beverages permitted by the district's wellness policy.

The policies mentioned in this issue can help to ensure a safe and happy holiday season for all. Good communication is key to keeping the holidays relatively stress-free in the school setting.