

Religion in the Public Schools

The Board's policy on religion is an affirmation that in the Corvallis schools all religions will be treated fairly and equitably and that school resources will not be used to promote or give special advantages to one religion over others. The overall principle stressed by Board policy is not a denial of the importance of religions or their place in the development of humankind, but rather a respect for all religions and a determination to maintain a neutral stance in areas where religious dogmas intersect.

No policy can provide ready answers to every situation that may arise in the schools. School employees, however, will find that in most instances the application of the basic philosophy of the document to an inquiry into the purposes and effects of any activity provides adequate guidance.

1. Teaching About Religions

Throughout the period of the writing of the Board's Religion in the Public Schools policy and Board hearings, a great deal of concern was expressed that staff members, through fear of making "mistakes" or through misinterpretations of the policy, might become overcautious and eliminate legitimate study of religions from the schools. Ignorance is antithetical to an atmosphere of respect for religious differences. It is, therefore, an important corollary to the district's policy that the schools increase efforts to help students understand the basic tenets and traditions of the major world religions. History, literature, music, and art instructors will all have an increased responsibility to provide this instruction.

2. Teaching About Religious Holidays

Religion as a subject for objective study, and religious literature, music, and art as a means of developing student appreciation and skills are legitimate areas of study in school. Board policy asks teachers to be careful, however, that when religious holidays are explained the explanation accurately reflects the beliefs of the religion's adherents. The policy suggests that one way this can be done is to invite representatives of these religions in to classrooms to provide these explanations.

Schools are cautioned to be sensitive to the feelings of persons having different religious beliefs and practices. This sensitivity should exist at all times, but especially in activities associated with religious holidays. It is suggested that teachers consider the purposes and effects of their activities in determining whether or not they are appropriate. If the purpose is instructional (as opposed to devotional) and if the activity does not diminish, put at a disadvantage or discriminate against the religious beliefs of individuals or groups, the activity is probably appropriate.

3. Class Activities Utilizing Religious Content

Religious music performed as part of a secular program or concert will be permitted. Music as part of a devotional service at and for the school will not be permitted. Teachers will avoid the

celebration of religious holidays through the performing arts and art in the classroom or at school functions.

School sponsored performing groups or individuals may accept invitations to perform at religious worship services under special circumstances with permission of the superintendent.

It is not a Constitutional or Board policy violation if throughout the school year the teacher prepares classroom displays concerning various religions and includes in the classroom presentation instructions or explanations concerning the importance of the display or symbols to believers in those various religions.

The inclusion of songs or readings of importance to various religions in school programs is not a violation of the Constitution or Board policy.

As a general rule, school groups will not be permitted to perform at religious worship services. In this regard, the term “worship services” is used to refer to services in which worship and prayer are the central focus of the services. Examples of such services are the regular Sunday morning worship service and the Wednesday night prayer service.

Under unusual circumstances exceptions may be made by the superintendent (e.g., memorial services).

4. Use of Religious Symbols in the Schools

When religious symbols, e.g., creche, crucifix, Star of David, statue of Buddha, are used to further the legitimate goals of the school curriculum, they may be used and displayed in the school in the same manner as other instructional supplies. They may not be used for devotional or promotional purposes.

5. School Sponsorship of Baccalaureate Programs

If the school sponsors a baccalaureate program it must be nonreligious and all of the provisions of the Board’s policy on Religion in Public Schools will apply.

6. Wearing of Religious Garb by School Employees

In the absence of judicial clarification of the prohibition in the Oregon Statutes of the wearing of religious dress by teachers, Board policy assumes that any article of clothing or adornment that places a teacher or the school in the position of violating the Board’s policy on “Religion in Public Schools” is forbidden. Thus, articles of dress or adornment which are clearly and conspicuously religious are violations of policy. Included among the unacceptable articles of clothing are: the “Roman” collar; a priest or nun’s habit; the conspicuous wearing of a crucifix. Not included in this prohibition are inconspicuous articles of adornment (e.g., a cross, Star of David, Saint Christopher’s medal) or clothing worn for purposes of decoration or personal dedication but not intended to serve as a public testimonial.