

Religious Beliefs and Customs

Objective

To foster mutual understanding and respect for the rights of all individuals regarding their beliefs.

1. Nonpromotion

- Schools and/or staff may not promote any one religion over another.
- Initiation and participation in religious activities is a student right outside of the classroom/instructional time.
- Staff are prohibited from participating in or initiating religious activities during contract time.
- When the study of religion is appropriate, teachers must take care to present comprehensive information without endorsement.

2. Inclusion

- Care must be taken to ensure that students do not experience exclusion because of their religious beliefs or practices and can participate without distinction in classroom celebrations, schoolwide programs, displays, activities and performances.
- Student absences for religious purposes will be excused in accordance with district policy.

3. Curriculum/Instruction/Instructional Materials

- Programs about the role of religion in the social, cultural and historical development of civilization do not violate the religious neutrality of the public school.
- The occasion of religious and/or cultural holidays may provide opportunities for teaching about religion or cultures if:
 - a. It is done within the context of the school curriculum objectives; and
 - b. The purpose is to provide secular instruction about multicultural traditions rather than to promote, observe or celebrate particular religions or their holidays.
- The purpose of all school programs must be for the advancement of student learning and curricular goals. Care must be taken to avoid the presentation of religious symbols, music, art or other materials in celebration of any single religion over another.
- Consideration should be given to the cumulative effect of what is presented. A single art project, musical selection or holiday discussion does not violate the purpose of this practice.

4. Communication

- To ensure that school activities, programs and calendars are considerate of staff, students and community groups of all faiths, unit managers shall utilize advisory resources and parent groups in their planning and development.
- The district shall educate the staff regarding the policy and administrative regulations for religious beliefs and customs. This training shall be ongoing and required for all new employees.

5. Performing Groups/Programs/Activities

- The purpose of school concerts and programs is to provide parents and others with an opportunity to observe a performance/demonstration of classroom learning. School concerts and programs should reflect the philosophy of the district. Holidays which have both a religious and secular basis (e.g., Halloween, Christmas and Valentine’s Day) may be observed in schools. The historical and contemporary values and origin of religious holidays may be explained in an objective manner without indoctrination. Religious symbols¹ may be displayed only as part of a broad, balanced multicultural study. The overall effect of such display shall not promote or favor any religious practice, belief or nonbelief. Religious music², which traditionally is part of the cultural religious heritage, may be used if presented in a prudent and objective manner. Religious music should not dominate in any program. Care must be taken to avoid the presentation of religious music as a celebration of a particular religion or religious holiday and to ensure that there is no intent to promote or denigrate any particular religion or nonreligion.
- School choruses, bands, orchestras and other performing groups may accept occasional invitations to perform at nonschool religious functions with the condition that any member of the group may be excused without penalty.
- If it is deemed appropriate by the unit manager and teachers to authorize parties, they must be secular in nature and their overall effect should not promote any religious practice or belief.
- Classroom-sponsored student gift exchanges are inappropriate if connected with a religious holiday.
- In scheduling school activities, the district shall strive to reasonably accommodate the needs of the religious holiday.
 - a. Soliciting input annually from the community before setting the school/district calendar. (Advisory committees, parent groups, PTAs, PTOs, newsletters and site councils.)
 - b. Scheduling school activities to reduce the amount of conflict with the community’s religious activities.

¹A religious symbol includes: Any object which portrays or recognizes the existence of a supreme being or deity. The cross, Star of David, crèche, menorah, tablets, chalices, crescent, Buddha and any other symbols which are part of a religious celebration are in this category.

²Religious music includes: Any music which recognizes the existence of a supreme being or deity. “The Messiah,” “O Holy Night,” “Silent Night,” “The Kaddish,” “Kol Nidre” and “Maoz Tzur” are examples of this music. Music is not prohibited solely because it has a reference to God in it.

- c. In-servicing staff to increase sensitivity to students' religious needs when scheduling activities.

6. Graduation and Commencement

- Prayer or any aspect of religious belief shall not be a school-initiated part of the commencement or graduation exercise.
- The baccalaureate service may be sponsored by separate (parent or student) organizations since it is traditionally religious in nature and cannot be sponsored by the district.

7. Memorial Services for Students with Staff

- In the event of the death of a student or staff member, schools may hold memorial services. Such services should focus on the memories related to the role of the individual at the school. School memorials will not be spiritual in nature oriented to a specific religious denomination or its rituals.

Staff members and students may be released in accordance with other district policies and contractual agreements to attend memorial services sponsored by the family of the deceased.