

Religious and Secular Programs

Religious instruction is a private concern. Public schools cannot require or influence a person to go to, or remain away from, religious services. While the public schools must remain neutral regarding religion, they should foster respect for each individual's convictions about religion and an understanding and respect for all religions in general. The United States Supreme Court expressed this view in rendering its *Zorach* case decision in 1952, stating, "...we find no constitutional requirement which makes it necessary for government to be hostile to religion and throw its weight against efforts to widen the effective scope of religious influence..."

1. Public School Practices and Procedures. Factual and objective teaching about religion is to be distinguished from the teaching of religion. For example, religion is often a factor to be considered in history, art, literature or music. Teachers may explain the meaning of religious holidays (Hanukkah, Christmas, Passover, St. Patrick's Day, Good Friday, etc.) as viewed by a religion's adherents, and others, but may not recognize such holidays with religious observances of symbols in the classroom or otherwise.
2. Instruction in morality, ethics and values is encouraged; however, instruction shall not resort to partisan religious sanctions.
3. Reading of religious literature for historical or literary instructional purposes is encouraged; however, where attendance is mandatory, religious literature may not be used for devotional purposes or to influence religious beliefs. The distribution to individual students on school property of New or Old Testaments, Bibles or other religious literature (other than for clearly identified school curriculum purposes) is prohibited. Recitations of prayers in classes shall not be required or sponsored by school officials or the district.
4. Neither instructional materials (including films) nor required assembly programs shall be used to promote or encourage nonreligion, partisan religion, partisan religious viewpoints, religious groups, or partisan religious activities.
5. Religious music as part of a secular program or concert shall be permitted. School choruses, bands, orchestras and other performing groups may accept invitations to perform at nonschool religious functions only on condition that any member of the group may be excused at his/her request without penalty.
6. No public school funds shall be used for intended devotional displays or religious symbols such as a Star of David, cross, crucifix, Christmas nativity scene, or a Buddhist statue of sacred monkeys, except as they are related to a course of study.

7. Religious baccalaureate services shall not be a required school activity. Attendance at any such service should be entirely optional with class members and school personnel acting as private individuals.
8. A student's religious beliefs shall be honored by excusing him/her without penalty at the student's parental request from school attendance on his/her own official religious holidays. Also, upon a student's parental request, the student may be given alternative assignments for required school work that may be personally objectionable due to the family's or students' practiced religious beliefs.
9. Dual enrollment whereby students may pursue a portion of their studies in the public school and another portion in a nonpublic school is permissible. The district shall operate with parents and nonpublic school officials in making such arrangements.
10. The district shall make a reasonable effort to accommodate released-time programs whereby students may be excused from school to attend schools giving instruction in religion.

Comment for Information

"The U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Tennessee ruled that Bible study courses as offered in two Tennessee counties violated the First Amendment Establishment Clause. . .The District Court, in deciding the case, applied the now-famous three-prong test handed down by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Committee for Public Education vs. Nyquist*: (1) Whether the nature, intent, and purpose of the Bible study courses are primarily secular, (2) whether the effect of the courses is either to advance or inhibit religion, and (3) whether the manner of offering the course avoids excessive entanglement between government and religion. . ."

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