

Teaching About Religion and Religious Observances

Code #381.01

Introduction -- Religious education is the responsibility of the home and church. However, religion influences many areas of education, such as literature and history, and religion's role in civilization can, and should be, properly taught. In other words, it is proper for teachers to teach about religion as opposed to teaching sectarian beliefs. Teachers shall be permitted to expose students to information concerning religion and religious beliefs, when it is appropriate to the established curriculum.

The Tri-County Area School District is committed to an integrated multicultural curriculum. Holidays associated with religion sometimes have cultural significance. The cultural expressions about holidays associated with religion may be taught as part of the District curriculum, provided that the teaching is done to support the curriculum, rather than to promote or infringe upon religious beliefs or to show preference for one religion over another. For the purpose of this policy, religion is defined as personal or institutional beliefs regarding the service and worship of God.

The District population includes students from many religious belief systems, as well as students who do not believe in religion. The District respects the right of parents/guardians to educate their children in spiritual and religious matters, including the interpretation of the spiritual significance of religious holidays. Celebrating religious holidays is the responsibility of families and religious institutions. However, the Tri-County Area School District must recognize the realities of religious diversity in the community and among the pupils and should continue, as they have done, to teach pupils that acceptance of, and respect for such differences are basic to American democracy and contribute toward harmonious living in a free society.

Classrooms in the District should reflect a climate where cultural, religious, and non-religious differences are respected and self-expression is encouraged. All staff and children should feel that their traditions will be respected and valued. All students can participate in sharing activities and learn from one another regardless of their religious or nonreligious beliefs and traditions.

Teaching About Religion -- The District may teach about the role of religion in society if such teaching supports the District curriculum; they may not do so, however, to promote or infringe upon religious beliefs or to show preference for one religion over another.

Programs or presentations that focus on the role that religion has played in history or the development of society are acceptable. Programs that educate students about the principle of religious liberty as one of the central elements of freedom and democracy in the United States and other countries are also acceptable.

The use of religious symbols such as a cross, Menorah, crescent, Star of David, crèche, symbols of native American religions or other symbols that are part of a religious holiday is permitted as a teaching aid or resource provided such symbols are displayed as an example of the

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cultural and religious heritage of the holiday and are temporary in nature. Among these holidays are included Christmas, Easter, Passover, Hanukkah, St. Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day, Thanksgiving and Halloween.

Suggestions for Classroom Discussions -- The discussion of religion and/or religious holidays is appropriate for teachers to initiate in the context of the District curriculum or current events and for students to initiate as self expression. The classroom teacher shall determine, within the normal process of the District, whether and how to help students learn about holidays associated with religion. The curriculum and related activities shall be inclusive of all students and conform to Board Policy on controversial issues.

Any school activity that relates to holidays associated with religion shall have a secular educational purpose, shall not advance or inhibit religion, shall avoid excessive entanglement with religion, and shall not violate the Constitution's prohibition of religious or sectarian instruction.

Teachers may explain the meanings of religious holidays provided that it supports the District curriculum and that every effort is made to obtain adequate and authentic information.

Teachers should avoid potential embarrassment of students by refraining from asking them to explain their own religious holidays or bring symbols of their religious holidays to school as a basis for discussion. Religious symbols may be brought to school or worn by staff and students, however, as a means of self expression. Show sensitivity to the feelings of all children in planning the curriculum, art and music activities. Each teacher should provide opportunities for the children to express their own feelings and views in a variety of expressions, without pressure and without deterring any child's enthusiasm and reaction during holiday time.

Music -- Much of the inspiration for the world's greatest artists and composers has its basis in religion. The study of their works does not imply or require acceptance of the composer's religious beliefs. Music teachers are expected to seek a balance of musical selections from different cultures and provide instruction in music that can be appreciated by a diverse community.

Curriculum materials should be selected for their musical value. Religious music may be included, and it is selected for its musical value, and if it does not dominate a program.

Activities should be presented in an educational context, including information on the history and cultural traditions associated with the activities. They should be developed based on the assumption of cultural pluralism, rather than on the assumption that all share similar religious beliefs or have similar knowledge or cultural traditions.

The opportunity for student performances is an important part of the District music curriculum.

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For all performances teachers must apply guidelines in terms of inclusiveness, lack of excessive attention, dignity, and educational context.

Some of these performance opportunities will be at functions primarily inspired by holidays, i.e. winter parties or singing at malls. Although these performances are acceptable, they should be limited. Student participation in performances, or portions thereof, that are inspired by holidays associated with religion must be optional.

When religious music is performed, a brief explanation of the musical and/or District curriculum reason for its selection will avoid its being viewed as promoting or infringing upon religious beliefs, its mixing religions, or its showing preference for one religion over another.

Art -- The selection of art projects should be based upon the District art curriculum which does not include projects that promote or infringe upon religious beliefs or show preference for one religion over another.

Students, using art as a means of self expression, may reflect their religious beliefs or symbols in the art projects that they produce.

Drama -- Dramatic productions should be based upon the District curriculum or selected for their dramatic value. If a production incorporates religious ideas, it may not promote or infringe upon religious beliefs. Productions that have religious ideas as their central theme or focus should not be selected.

Room Decorations -- Room decorations should be based upon the District curriculum or student self expression, rather than either to promote or infringe upon religious beliefs or to show preference for one religion over another.

Cross Reference: 333.01, Student Exemption from Class
333.01AR, Procedure for Waiver for Participation in Approved Curricular Programs

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