Religious Related Activities and Practices

The public schools exist to provide a secular education for all children, and religious instruction is not appropriate in the public schools. In this regulation, factual and objective teaching about religion and its role in human society is distinguished from religious instruction. It is appropriate for public schools to teach about religions within a cultural and historical context for the purpose of meeting secular educational objectives.

Guidelines for Maintaining Religious Neutrality

Religious neutrality means that schools must not aid or inhibit any religion or all religions, nor favor believers or non-believers. Staff should avoid practices which tend to single out and isolate pupils and result in their having to choose between participating in some activity and violating their own religious beliefs. Efforts should be made to communicate with parents about their right to exempt their child from activities or classes.

Programs which teach about religion and its role in the social and historical development of civilization do not violate the religious neutrality of the public schools. Schools may recognize religion and its role in human society. The district encourages programs which educate students about the principles of religious liberty as one of the central elements of freedom in America. In this context, teachers may explain the meanings of various religious activities, holidays and symbols.

Whether an activity or symbol is permissible or not depends as much on the circumstances of its use as on the activity or symbol itself. For this reason, no answer to questions about what is or is not permissible can be provided in advance without considering the following questions:

A. Does this event or activity relate to the educational or cultural enrichment program and/or to particular student learning objectives?

B. Is it being used with sensitivity to the feelings of all students?

C. Is it clear that it is not being used for the purpose of religious worship, exercise, or instruction or to support any or anti-religious perspective.

D. Is it clear that its use does not establish or permit sectarian control or influence of the school program?

E. Is there a way to reach the educational goal while also accommodating and being sensitive to the beliefs of the students involved?
Guidelines for Religious Holiday Observances

School programs specifically relating to religious holidays shall not be, nor have the effect of being, a religious celebration. The atmosphere of a religious ceremony or celebration shall be avoided. Any program which might be interpreted as religious indoctrination or which promotes or favors the beliefs and practices of any one or several religious faiths, shall be avoided.

The discussion and/or recognition of religious holidays in an objective manner is appropriate in a school provided that it is consistent with the instructional program.

Schools may acknowledge traditional holidays that have both a religious and secular basis. These guidelines shall be followed for holiday activities and programs:

A. Neither worship services nor religious ceremonies or programs of any kind shall be held.

B. Religious music is permitted as a balanced part of a school-sponsored activity or program. Religious music should not dominate a program so that the cumulative impact of the program is religious. Special music and drama programs should have instruction as a purpose. Programs specifically relating to holidays should not be nor have the effect of being a religious celebration. Music of religious significance should be justified on the basis of its particular musical value and/or traditional non-church usage and be presented in context with other musical works which are non-religious in nature. Musical pieces should be selected and performed as works of art, not as acts of veneration. Program notes or oral narration may be provided. These notes should establish an objective context for the performance by giving such information as historical data, identification of the particular group for which the number has significance and technical characteristics worthy of note.

C. Seasonal decorations associated with holidays are permissible, provided the decorations are not religious in nature.

D. Religious symbols such as a cross, icons, Star of David, torah, menorah, crescent, creche, and symbols of Native American religions may be shown to students solely for secular instructional purposes, but should not become fixed displays. Classroom displays and decorations pertaining to religion or a religious symbol or holiday must be related to instruction that is based upon the district’s educational goals. Such displays and decorations must derive from classroom instruction and should avoid any implication that the school supports or favors any particular religious or sectarian doctrine.

E. Students and staff have a right to wear religious symbols in a manner which is not materially and substantially disruptive to the educational process.
F. Exchanging gifts as a celebration of any holiday shall be avoided because of the adverse impact such a practice causes for students who cannot participate.

**Students’ Rights of Religious Expression**

The United States Constitution, and the Washington state Constitution guarantee that students retain their rights of free speech and free exercise of religion. These rights include, but are not limited to, the right of an individual student to freely express and incorporate the student’s religious beliefs and opinions where relevant or appropriate in any and all class work, homework, evaluations or tests.

A. Staff may not grade the class work, homework, evaluation, or test on the religious expression, but may grade the student’s performance on scholastic content such as spelling, sentence structure, and grammar, and the degree to which the student’s performance reflects the instruction and objectives established by staff.

B. Staff may not subject a student who expresses religious beliefs or opinions in accordance with this section to any form of retribution or negative consequence and may not penalize the student’s standing, evaluations, or privileges.

C. Staff may not censure a student’s expression of religious beliefs or opinions, when relevant or appropriate, in any class work, homework, evaluations or tests, extracurricular activities, or other activities under the sponsorship or auspices of the district.

D. No officer, employee, agent, or contractors of the district may impose his or her religious beliefs on any student in class work, homework, evaluations or tests, extracurricular activities, or other activities under the auspices of the district.

**Absences Due to Religious Observances**

The right of parents or guardian to determine when their children should be absent from school because of religious observances shall not be limited by school authorities. A religious holiday is defined as a day or days for which current religious practices dictate commemoration or celebration of an event. Written notification of absence should be provided to school authorities as far in advance as possible by the parent or guardian.

Students shall not be penalized or deprived of reasonable makeup opportunities as set out in 3122R for such absences, or subjected to pressure to choose between school attendance and religious observance.

School personnel will take into account the possible effects of religious holidays on school attendance when planning school calendars. When possible, examinations and important school activities will not be scheduled on such holidays.
School personnel will also honor written requests from parents that their children be excused from any activity which is contrary to their religious beliefs, unless there is a compelling concern which would prevent such release; a reasonable alternative activity will be provided for any student so excused.

**Baccalaureate and Commencement Services**

Groups composed of interested students and their families may plan and organize baccalaureate services which are religious in nature. District funds, including paid staff time, shall not be used for baccalaureate services. Attendance at such services should be entirely voluntary with students and school personnel acting as private individuals. Groups planning baccalaureate services may rent and utilize school facilities under terms, conditions and rates prescribed by district policy.

School authorized prayers or religious invocations at commencement or other school-sponsored programs are prohibited.

**Teaching About Religion Objectively**

Factual and objective teaching about religion, the impact of religion, and religious-based ideas and ideals may be included in classroom instruction in relation to the district’s educational goals and student learning objectives. It is inherent to the teaching of history, literature, social studies, intercultural education, human relations, art and music to include what various religions and religious movements have contributed to these fields. The teaching about religion should be done with sensitivity to the feelings and beliefs of all students.

Factual and objective teaching about religion is to be distinguished from the teaching or promotion of religion. Consequently, legitimate teaching about religion may be conducted but shall not:

1. Utilize instructional material to promote, encourage or disparage non-religious or religious viewpoints, groups and/or activities;
2. Involve assemblies and/or other programs that promote, encourage or disparage religion or non-religion;
3. Take the form of religious instruction, worship, exercise or persuasion; or
4. Attack or promulgate religion, or the absence of religion, or any particular belief system; or
5. Question the religious belief, or absence of religious belief, of any student; or
6. Require a student to declare a religious preference.
Complaints about Separation of Church and State

The district’s complaint procedure, as outline in Policy 4220 and 4220R, should be followed by anyone who feels this policy is not being implemented properly.

1. The constitutions, particularly our state constitution, dictate that the public schools remain neutral with respect to religion. Religious neutrality does not mean that a school district must ignore Christmas or avoid all activities which constitute participation or the promotion of participation in Christmas holiday season festivities. A school district is not required to be blind to such a traditional holiday simply because of its corresponding religious significance.

2. Principles of constitutional law establish that observance and promotion of the religious significance of Christmas must be limited in order to avoid an unconstitutional promotion of or indoctrination in religion by the public schools.

3. School districts shall not spend public funds or sponsor activities in a manner which has the primary effect of promoting or negating religious beliefs.

4. Elements or symbols of Christmas and other holidays which possess a significant non-religious as well as religious origin and/or significance such as the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus, Christmas trees, reindeer, holly wreaths, and yule logs appear to be constitutionally permissible even though they may represent what is a religious as well as a traditional non-religious holiday. The district encourages building administrators to keep the use of these symbols to a minimum.

5. It is also thought to be constitutional to arrange for or allow, to an unknown extent, the presentation of music which has religious significance. The following guidelines apply: a) Any music of religious significance should be justified on the basis of its particular musical virtue and/or traditional non-church usage in connection with the general public’s observance of religious holidays, and be presented in context with music which is non-religious in nature; and b) music containing lyrics that may have the effect of a religious teaching or that contain lyrics of adoration for or the equivalent of prayer should be avoided.

Adoption Date: 11/28/00