

RECOGNITION OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND CUSTOMS

Introduction

The policy of the district reflects a commitment to the principles of religious neutrality and the accommodation of diversity, promoting respect and understanding of different beliefs and customs. To include religious music, symbols, art or writings in school programs, displays, performances, classroom activities and/or celebrations, the teacher must demonstrate an educational purpose consistent with the stated objectives of the curriculum. Therefore, reflective preview by teacher and administrator of the content of such activities is necessary and appropriate. In considering any material, the artistic, social and cultural aspects relevant to the purpose for including the material should be taken into account.

Religion in the Curriculum

Religious institutions and orientations are central to human experience, past and present. An education excluding such a significant aspect of human culture would be incomplete. It is essential that teaching about and not of religion be conducted in a factual, objective and respectful manner.

Therefore, the practice of the district shall be as follows:

1. The district supports the inclusion of religious literature, music, drama and the arts in the curriculum provided it is intrinsic to the learning experience in the various fields of study and is presented objectively. Care should be taken when considering the seasonal inclusion of literature, music, drama and the arts that the use not lead to the observation or celebration of a particular religious holiday. Religious music should not dominate and any dramatic productions should emphasize the cultural aspects of the holiday. For example, while recognizing the holiday season, none of the school activities in December should have the purpose or effect of promoting or inhibiting religion;
2. Instruction should never foster any particular religious tenets or demean any religious beliefs or non-beliefs;
3. The emphasis on religious themes in the arts, literature and history should be appropriate to its educational value and only as extensive as necessary for a balanced and comprehensive study of these areas;
4. Student-initiated expressions in response to questions or assignments which reflect their beliefs or

non-beliefs about religious themes shall be accommodated. For example, students are free to express religious belief or non-belief in compositions, art forms, music, speech and debate.

Exemption from Course(s)

The practice of the district is to excuse students from state- or district-required programs, learning activities and expectations when those programs, activities or expectations conflict with religious beliefs of parents and students (according to Oregon Administrative Rules). In the case of individual lessons, students may be assigned alternative assignments in a way which is not embarrassing to the student. When a significant portion of a state- or district-required course is objectionable, the student will be granted an exemption from the course and any expectations assigned to that course. In such cases, the student will be expected to enroll in another class and, at the high school level, to earn a credit in lieu of the exempted course. The exemption from a course on religious grounds does not reduce the number of credits required for graduation from the district. Any waiver or exemption from state- or district-required courses must be acknowledged in writing by the parent, and a copy of the request and decision must be filed with the appropriate executive administrator of school improvement and support as well as attached to the transcript.

One written request by the parent on file is all that is required per student during his/her time in a particular school.

Dedications and Commencement

Traditions are a cherished part of the community life and the district expresses an interest in maintaining those traditions which have had a significance to the community. Such ceremonies should recognize the religious pluralism of the community.

Therefore, the practice of the district shall be as follows:

1. A dedication ceremony should recognize the religious pluralism of the community and be appropriate to those who use the facility. An open invitation should be extended to all citizens to participate in the ceremony;
2. Traditions, i.e., invocation and benediction, inherent in commencement ceremonies, should be honored in the spirit of accommodation and good taste;
3. Because the baccalaureate service is traditionally religious in nature, it should be sponsored by agencies separate from the district;
4. School choruses, bands, orchestras and other performing groups may accept occasional invitations to perform at non-school religious functions with the condition that:
 - a. Any member of the group may be excused without penalty of any sort at his/her request; and
 - b. The performance must meet the test of religious neutrality. However, school choruses, bands, orchestras and other performing groups may not sponsor or promote performances at

religious functions or of a religious nature.

Holidays

Studying about religious holidays may be included in elementary, middle and high school curricula as opportunities for teaching about religions if:

1. The purpose is to provide secular instruction about multicultural religious traditions rather than to promote, observe or celebrate particular religions or religious holidays;
2. It is done within the context of the district curriculum.

Religious music*, symbols**, art or writing in school programs, displays, performances, classroom activities and/or celebrations must have an educational purpose consistent with the stated objectives of the curriculum. Where the study of religion is an integral part of the curriculum, whether it is seasonal or not seasonal, symbols appropriate to that study may be displayed for the time their presence is necessary to the study and shall be limited to the area(s) where the study occurs. Religious symbols may be displayed seasonally only as a part of a broad, balanced multicultural study. The overall effect of such a display shall not promote or favor any religious practice, belief or non-belief.

* Religious 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.

** A religious symbol includes:

Any object which portrays or recognizes the existence of a supreme being or deity. The cross, star of David, nativity scene, menorah, tablets, chalices, crescent, Buddha and any other symbols which are part of a religious celebration are in this category.

In all school programs and study, 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 non-religion.

The district and school calendars shall be prepared with the intent to avoid conflicts with the religious holidays of all faiths. Where conflicts are unavoidable, care should be taken to avoid tests, special projects, introduction of new concepts and other activities which would be difficult or impossible to make up. The students who remain in school should continue to have meaningful learning experiences.

A student's religious beliefs shall be honored by excusing the student at the student's or parent's request from school on the student's religious holidays. Upon successful completion of make-up work, there shall be no penalties attached to these absences. Care must be taken at all levels to respect student's rights to express themselves through the use of religious symbols in reports, projects and other assignments as long

as these symbols are removed upon completion of the activity.

Educators must be sensitive to the diversity of cultural backgrounds and religious beliefs in our society. Special care must be taken to ensure that students do not experience exclusionary feeling and can participate comfortably in school programs, displays, performances, classroom activities and/or celebrations. Classroom parties held at a holiday time must be secular in nature and their overall effect should not promote or favor any religious practice, belief or non-belief.

Reconsideration of the Use of Religious Curriculum

Although care is exercised by the teacher and administrator so that the inclusion of religious literature, music, drama and the arts in the curriculum avoids the observation or celebration of a particular religious holiday, a member of the community or staff may wish to request a reconsideration of an activity, display or performance which is inconsistent with the curriculum. In such an event, the individual shall contact the teacher to informally resolve the issue. If the matter cannot be resolved at that level, the principal shall:

1. Have the community or staff member complete the form for "Reconsideration of Religious Curriculum";
2. Acknowledge receipt of all written or verbal requests for reconsideration of religious curriculum;
3. Notify all staff members who are directly involved in the request;
4. Forward the "Request for Reconsideration of Religious Curriculum" and other appropriate correspondence to the K-12 administrator for curriculum and staff development;
5. The K-12 administrator for curriculum and staff development will establish a committee to review the request for reconsideration;
6. The curriculum in question shall continue to be used until the formal procedure is complete;
7. Final action on the request shall be taken by the administration no later than five school days after the K-12 administrator for curriculum and staff development receives the completed "Request for Reconsideration of Religious Curriculum";
8. The individual making the request for reconsideration may withdraw the request at any time during the review process.

Establishment of a Review Committee

The review committee will be established by the K-12 administrator for curriculum and staff development. The K-12 administrator for curriculum and staff development will serve as or delegate the chair of the committee to an instruction division administrator. The teachers from the same grade level or subject at which the curriculum is being used, a site council member and a principal(s) will be a part of the committee. A student may also be included on the committee. The specific number of representatives from various categories will depend on the nature and use of the curriculum in question.

Committee Review Procedure

1. Committee members will receive copies of the statement questioning the instructional material.
2. Opportunity shall be afforded the person(s) or group questioning the materials to meet with the committee and to present their opinions. Committee members may ask the presenter(s) questions for the purpose of better understanding or clarifying their presentations.
3. The committee meetings shall be open to other staff or public who wish to observe the deliberations.
4. The committee will review the curriculum in question and form opinions based on how the curriculum reflects Board policy in meeting requirements of neutrality and tolerance.
5. The committee will formulate its recommendations and prepare a written report for the assistant superintendent who will make a final determination for action.

Action Taken

1. The action taken relative to the request for reconsideration of religious curriculum will be communicated in writing to the person submitting the request.
2. The final decision shall be sent to all district administrators.
3. Disposition of the appeal shall be made known to all parties in the action.

Request for Reconsideration of Religious Curriculum

Initiated by _____
Name (Please Print) Telephone

Address

Representing _____
Self Group (Name)

Curriculum questioned:

Please respond to the following questions. If more space is needed, use additional paper.

1. To what aspect of the curriculum do you object? Please cite specifics.

2. Please discuss the rationale for your objection and the basis on which the objection rests.

3. What action do you recommend that the school take on this curriculum?

Signature

Date

Please return this form to the principal.

Received by the principal: _____
Signature

School

Date and Time of Day

(continued)

STATEMENT OF COURSE EXEMPTION
(to be attached to student transcript)

Approval has been granted to _____ for an exemption from
Student Name

_____ due to a conflict with family religious beliefs. This exemption was initiated by
the attached written request from the student's parent(s), _____

Principal Signature

Instruction Division Signature

QUESTIONS/ANSWERS - RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND CUSTOMS

The following information is intended to provide guidance as you plan and monitor the activities in your school. It is not always possible to provide concrete answers to questions on this subject and, therefore, considerable judgment is required of both principals and staff members.

Curriculum

1. What do the courts say about religion and the public schools?

The Supreme Court has ruled that public schools may not sponsor religious practices but may teach about religion.

While having made no definitive ruling on religious holidays in the schools, the Supreme Court let stand a lower federal court decision stating that recognition of holidays may be constitutional if the purpose is to provide secular instruction about religious traditions rather than to promote the particular religion involved (Florey v. Sioux Falls School District, 8th Circuit 1980).

2. What is the difference between teaching about religion and teaching religious practices?

The Supreme Court has ruled that the Constitution does not prohibit teaching about religion in an objective manner. Indeed, certain aspects of history, literature, art and music cannot be taught without references to religion. Teaching the role of religion in relation to these subjects is quite different from teaching the precepts of a religion.

3. Do religious holidays belong in the curriculum?

The study of religious holidays may be included in elementary, middle and high school curricula as opportunities for teaching about religions. Such study serves the academic goals of educating students about history and cultures as well as the traditions of particular religions within a pluralistic society. The social studies may include aspects of cultural studies including the history of religious customs and beliefs. The use of art, drama or literature with religious themes is permissible if it serves a sound educational goal in the curriculum and does not promote a religious belief.

4. May religious music be used in public schools?

Sacred music may be sung or played as part of the academic study of music. School concerts that present a variety of selections may include religious music. Concerts should avoid programs dominated by religious music, especially when these coincide with a particular religious holiday.

5. Should all children, including those in a religious minority, be asked to sing songs that have religious references?

All children should be given the opportunity to learn as much as possible about other religions.

The issue is really more cultural than religious. The principal and the staff need to be sensitive to this issue, however, and consider:

- The needs and backgrounds of all students;
- The need to include all students in the planned activities when possible;
- What the teacher is attempting to accomplish as part of a year-long set of activities.

6. May teachers have guest speakers on religion (pastors, rabbis, priests, etc.)?

If the guest speakers are invited to share information about a religious custom or belief and the activity is part of the planned curriculum, using guest speakers is permissible and in most cases encouraged.

Study of Religious Holidays and Customs

1. How should religious holidays be treated in the classroom?

Teachers must be alert to the distinction between teaching about religious holidays, which is permissible and celebrating religious holidays, which is not. Recognition of and information about holidays may focus on how and when they are celebrated, their origins, histories and generally agreed-upon meanings. If the approach is objective and sensitive, neither promoting nor inhibiting religion, this study can foster understanding and mutual respect for differences in belief.

2. When should teaching about religious holidays take place?

At the elementary and middle school level, natural opportunities arise for discussion of religious holidays while studying different cultures and communities. In the middle and high school curriculum, students of world history or literature have opportunities to consider the holy days of religious traditions. Teachers find it helpful when they are provided with an inclusive calendar noting major religious and secular holidays with brief descriptions of their significance.

3. What about Christmas?

Decisions about what to do in December should begin with the understanding that public schools may not sponsor religious devotions or celebrations; study about religious holidays does not extend to religious worship or practice.

Does this mean that all seasonal activities must be banned from the schools? Probably not, and in any event, such an effort would be unrealistic. The resolution would seem to lie in devising holiday programs that serve an educational purpose for all students — programs that make no students feel excluded or identified with a religion not their own.

Holiday concerts in December may appropriately include music related to Christmas and Hanukkah but religious music should not dominate. Any dramatic productions should emphasize the cultural aspects of the holiday. Nativity pageants or plays portraying the Hanukkah miracle are not

appropriate in the public school setting. In short, while recognizing the holiday season, none of the school activities in December should have the purpose or effect of promoting or inhibiting religion.

4. May religious symbols be used in public school classes?

The use of religious symbols, provided they are used only as examples of cultural and religious heritage, is permissible as a teaching aid or resources. Religious symbols may be displayed only on a temporary basis as part of the academic program. Students may choose to create artwork with religious symbols, but teachers should not encourage or discourage such creations. There has to be an educational purpose and some judgment in where any religious symbols are displayed.

5. Is a Christmas tree a religious symbol?

A Christmas tree is not by itself a religious symbol. The Supreme Court has ruled that, “Although Christmas trees once carried religious connotations, today they typify the secular celebration of Christmas.” A Christmas tree can become a religious symbol when combined with other symbols or objects of religious significance. So long as the tree does not feature religious symbols such as angels, the Star of Bethlehem, and the Holy Family, the display of a Christmas tree in a public school does not appear to violate Constitutional standards.

As many people do closely associate Christmas trees with the Christian religious holiday of Christmas, we strongly advise against display of Christmas trees.

6. What about Hanukkah menorah?

If a menorah is to be displayed, it should be viewed in its secular aspects and explained as a symbol of victory over oppression.

7. What about Santa Claus? Is Santa Claus allowed in schools?

Presentations about or representations of Santa Claus should be based upon whatever educational value they have. Judgment should be exercised in using the Santa Claus character for entertainment only.

8. What about students and staff wearing religious clothing and/or decorations?

Students and staff may wear religious decorations under the same constitutional guarantees as govern free speech. Should a student or staff member create a disruption or a disturbance associated with the exercise of this right, the school reserves the authority under case law to suspend or expel a student. A staff member in a public school in Oregon (Cooper v. Eugene School District) may not wear religious clothing.

9. Is Halloween a religious holiday?

Generally, people no longer consider Halloween associated with religion. Some parents may object to some aspects of Halloween associated with witches or witchcraft. Some judgment should be exercised by staff or parents in planning events associated with Halloween and not emphasize this

aspect of the day.

Excusal from School

1. May students be absent for religious holidays?

Sensitive school policy on absences will take account of the religious needs and requirements of students. Students should be allowed a reasonable number of excused absences, without penalties, to observe religious holidays within their traditions. Students may be asked to complete make-up assignments or examinations in conjunction with school absences.

2. What about religious objections to some holidays?

Students from certain religious traditions may ask to be excused from classroom discussions or activities related to particular holidays. Some holidays, considered by many people to be secular (for example, Halloween and Valentine's Day) are viewed by others as having religious origins and/or overtones.

Excusal requests may be especially common in the elementary grades where holidays often are marked by parties and similar non-academic activities. Such requests are routinely granted.

In addition, some parents and students may make requests for excusals from discussions of certain holidays even when treated from an academic perspective. If focused on a limited, specific discussion, such requests may be granted in order to strike a balance between the student's religious freedom and the school's interest in providing a well-rounded education.

Administration and teachers should understand that a policy or practice of excusing students from a specific activity or discussion cannot be used as a rationale for school sponsorship of religious celebrations or worship for the remaining students.