



SECTION III: INSTRUCTION

POLICY 3020

COMMON GROUND: RELIGION IN SCHOOL

This policy is intended to be sensitive to individual beliefs and respectful of established law, as guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which provides as follows:

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

The proper role of religion in the public schools is in its educational value and not in religious observance or celebration. According to the Supreme Court, the Establishment Clause forbids state action or practices that aid or prefers one religion over another or that aids all religions and thus endorse or show preference for religion over non-religion, while the Free Exercise Clause requires any state action or practices which interfere with an individual's constitutionally protected religious freedom to be strictly scrutinized.

Absence from School for Religious Holidays

Upon a parent's request in advance, a student's absence from school to observe a religious holiday and associated travel shall be recognized as an absence which will not count against the district's 90% attendance requirement and will be reflected without penalty on scholastic records. In general, no student should suffer a penalty because of his/her involvement in religious observances related to his/her particular religious belief.

Parents' Rights to Excuse Students for Religious Reasons

Students will be excused from classroom lessons or activities which their parents find objectionable for religious reasons. Within reasonable limits, alternative lessons or activities will be substituted. The objection must be submitted to the building principal in writing.

Privacy

Individuals shall not be required to disclose their religious preferences or beliefs nor those of their family members.

Programs and Holidays

School programs and performances will serve an educational purpose. The inclusion of religious music, symbols, art, or writings may be permitted if the religious content has an independent educational purpose which contributes to the stated objectives of the approved curriculum.

The Supreme Court has made clear that public schools may not sponsor religious celebrations but may teach about religion. Secular and religious holidays provide opportunities for educating students about history and cultures, as well as traditions of particular religious groups within a pluralistic society.



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Teachers must exercise special caution and sensitivity whenever discussion about religious holidays occurs. Presentation of materials dealing with religious holidays must be accurate, informative, and descriptive. Focus should be on the origins, history, and generally agreed-upon meanings of the holidays. Teachers need to be aware, to the fullest extent possible, of the diversity of religious beliefs in their classrooms, and they will need to be particularly sensitive to the rights of religious minorities as well as those who hold no religious belief. Respect for religious diversity in the classroom requires that teachers be fair and balanced in their treatment of religious holidays.

Teachers need to be aware, to the fullest extent possible, of the major religious holidays of all the represented religions in their classrooms in order to avoid creating an undue burden on students who choose not to attend school on those days. Furthermore, teachers should be alert to the distinction between teaching about religious holidays and other cultural events, which is permissible, and celebrating religious holidays, which is not.

Religion in Curriculum and Instruction

On the elementary level, natural opportunities arise for discussion of religion and religious holidays while studying different cultures and communities. On the secondary level, the history of religion, comparative religion, and the Bible or other scripture as literature are all permissible topics. It is both permissible and desirable to teach objectively and accurately about the role of religion in the history of the United States and other countries.

Teaching about religion should conform to the following principles:

1. The school's approach to religion is academic, not devotional.
2. The school may strive for student awareness of religions, but should not press for student acceptance of any one religion.
3. The school may sponsor study about religion, but may not sponsor the practice of religion.
4. The school may expose students to a diversity of religious views, but may not impose any particular view or belief.
5. The school may educate about religions, but may not promote or denigrate any one religion or religion in general.

All discussion about religion in the context of curriculum should be governed by these guidelines:

1. Religious liberty, or freedom of conscience, is a basic and inalienable right founded on the inviolable dignity of the person.
2. Religious liberty is not only a universal right, but it also depends upon a universal responsibility to respect that right for others.
3. All debate and disagreement about religious differences should strive to be fair and accurate and maintain civility and respect.



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As part of the curriculum, religious literature, music, drama, and the arts may be included, provided each is intrinsic to the learning experience in the various fields of study and is presented objectively. Also, as part of the curriculum, students may be asked to read selections from writings for literary and historical qualities, but not for devotional purposes.

Religious Expression

As a general rule, students may express their religious viewpoint in the form of reports, both oral and written, class discussions, homework, and artwork. Teachers may not reject or correct such submissions simply because they include a religious symbol or address religious themes.

Teachers may not require students to modify, include, or excise religious views in their assignments. These assignments should be judged by ordinary academic standards of substance, relevance, appearance, and grammar.

Students have the right to pray individually or in groups and to discuss their religious views with their peers as long as they are not disruptive. Students may enjoy the right to read scriptures, pray silently, and discuss religion with other student listeners as long as the listeners are not coerced or harassed. Secondary students may form groups to meet on campus outside of school hours. They must be student-initiated. District employees may neither encourage nor discourage such organizations. During contract hours, district employees may not actively participate in club activities, and “non-school persons” may not regularly attend or control club meetings.

Religious Music

Religious music may be sung or played as part of the academic study of music.

At all levels, the study of religious music as part of a musical appreciation course, as a musical experience, or as part of a study of various lands and cultures can be included. In all school programs and study, care must be taken to avoid presentation of the music as a celebration of a particular religion or religious holiday. Teachers must be especially sensitive to the feelings of students who might prefer not to participate for religious reasons.

Religious Symbols

The use of religious symbols, provided they are used only as examples of cultural or religious heritage, is permissible as a teaching aid or resource. Religious symbols may be displayed only on a brief basis as part of the academic program. Students may choose to incorporate religious symbols into their work, but teachers should not assign or suggest such creations. Some symbols may have both secular and religious connotations; therefore, such symbols may also only be used as teaching aids and thus be displayed as part of the academic program as well.

Source: *Broken Arrow Board of Education Policy Adoption, June 16, 1997.*
Broken Arrow Board of Education policy revised, July 13, 2009.
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