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MEMORANDUM

TO: Building Administrators
FROM: Jollee Patterson
SUBJECT: Religious Issues

From time to time, questions arise about the extent to which religious expression and holiday activities are permitted in our schools. In planning activities, schools must not only protect an individual's right to freedom of religious expression but also avoid the endorsement of religious activity or doctrine. The following questions and answers are provided to assist you in reaching this balance.

Is it Constitutional to teach about religion in public schools?

Yes, public schools may teach about religion, but may not provide religious instruction. The history of religion, comparative religion, scripture as literature, and the role of religion in the history of the United States and other countries all are permissible public school subjects. Similarly, it is permissible to consider religious influences on art, music, literature, and social studies. Although public schools may teach about religious holidays, including their religious aspects, and may celebrate the secular aspects of holidays, schools may not observe holidays as religious events or promote such observances by students.

What is meant by "teaching about religion" in the public schools?

The following statements distinguish between teaching about religion and religious indoctrination:

- The school approach to religion is academic, not devotional.
- The school may strive for student awareness of religions, but should not press for student acceptance of any one religion.
- The school may sponsor study about religion, but may not sponsor the practice of religion.
- The school may expose students to a diversity of religious views, but may not impose any particular view.
- The school may educate about all religions, but may not promote or denigrate any religion.
- The school may inform the student about various beliefs, but should not seek to confirm him or her to any particular belief.

Do religious holidays belong in the curriculum?

The study of religious holidays may be included in elementary and secondary curricula as opportunities for teaching about religion. Such study serves the academic goals of educating students about history and culture, as well as the traditions of particular religions within a pluralistic society.

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 of the observances. If the approach is

objective and sensitive, neither promoting nor inhibiting religion, this study can foster among students understanding and mutual respect for differences in belief.

Teachers will want to avoid asking students to explain their belief and customs. An offer to do so should be treated with courtesy and accepted or rejected depending upon the educational relevancy.

Teachers may not use the study of religious holidays as an opportunity to proselytize or inject personal religious beliefs into discussions. Teachers can avoid this by teaching through attribution, i.e., by reporting that “some Buddhists believe . . .”

May religious symbols be used in public school classes?

Provided they are used only as examples of cultural or religious heritage, religious symbols are permissible to use as teaching aids 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.

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. However, if Christmas trees are displayed, we recommend that they are accompanied by symbols of other religious faiths.

May religious music be used in public schools?

Religious 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. For instance, holiday concerts in December may appropriately include music related to Christmas and Hanukkah, but religious music should not dominate.

The use of art, drama or literature with religious themes also is permissible if it serves a sound educational goal in the curriculum, but not if used as a vehicle for promoting religious belief. Any dramatic productions in December should emphasize the cultural aspects of the holidays. Nativity pageants or plays portraying the Hanukkah miracle are not appropriate in a public school setting.

May principals or teachers allow holiday parties in the classroom?

Yes, as long as the holiday party does not have the purpose, or effect, of promoting or inhibiting religion. Parties should not unduly disrupt the educational focus of school. Gift exchanges should not be permitted at school. Students who do not wish to participate in holiday parties because of their religious beliefs may be excused from attendance.

May holiday decorations that feature religious symbols be displayed in classrooms?

Holiday decorations that feature religious symbols may be displayed in classrooms only on a temporary basis as part of the academic program, not for the purpose of celebrating a religious holiday.

May holiday decorations that feature religious symbols be displayed in offices and other non-instructional areas?

Placing holiday decorations that feature religious symbols in hallways or on office walls, windows, counter tops, etc., would likely be viewed as government endorsement of religion, which is prohibited in a school setting. However, placing a small item (for example, a card or coffee mug) that features a religious symbol in or on one's personal workspace would probably not be perceived as government endorsement of religion.

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. The procedure for granting an exemption from instructional activities is set forth at Board Policy 6.20.010(4).

May students be absent for religious holidays?

Yes, individual student absences on religious holidays shall be authorized when requested by parents. Students who must be absent on religious holidays during testing days shall not be penalized and shall be given adequate opportunity to make up such tests or other vital work.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call me at ext. 63570.

References:

AD 3.20.014

AD 3.20.018

BP 6.20.010(4)

"Guidelines on Religious Expression in Public Schools" issued by the US Department of Education, Revised May 1998.

10/2006; updated 7/2014