SCHOOLS AND RELIGION

Curriculum

Teaching About Religion - Teaching about religious beliefs and their influence on society can be an important part of the curriculum. The teaching of religious beliefs in a persuasive or devotional way, however, is not appropriate for public schools. Religious beliefs that have influenced history, culture, music and art are legitimate areas of study. Likewise, the study of sacred works as literature, such as the Bhagavad-Gita, Bible, Qur’an, Torah or Vedas, is permissible as long as the work is not addressed in a devotional manner and neither preference nor disdain is shown toward any religion.

The study of religious beliefs should be based upon accurate information and should not disparage any religion. Staffs who teach about religions as a part of the curriculum must be knowledgeable about the subject matter.

Religious Doctrines - Subject matter content may not be included or excluded from the curriculum to advance the religious views of a particular group or staff member.

Fine Arts Performances, Assemblies, Exhibits and Field Trips - Fine arts classes may include religious content as long as no proselytizing takes place. Likewise, music performances and art exhibits may include religious works based on their artistic merit provided that the primary intent of the program is secular in nature. If fine arts presentations include religious works, these works should reflect a diversity of religious traditions. Any school sponsored field trips for the purpose of attending a holiday celebration or observing a religious service must be an extension of the adopted curriculum, secular in nature, which does not tend to endorse religion nor advance or inhibit it. School sponsored groups, such as choirs or sports teams, may not be required to attend, perform or participate in religious services, observances or events as representatives of the District.

Guest Presentations - While it is permissible for guest speakers to discuss the beliefs, culture and history of a particular religious group from a non-devotional point of view, these speakers may not promote or discourage any religious beliefs. Guest speakers should be made aware of such restrictions, particularly if they speak on matters of faith.

Excusal and Exemption - Upon written request of a parent or guardian, a student may be excused from studies, assignments or activities that substantially burden the student’s free exercise of religion unless excusal would defeat an overriding educational goal.

Privacy - Neither students nor staff may be coerced or induced to reveal their personal religious beliefs.

Prayer

School-Sponsored Prayer - District employees may not lead or promote prayers, the reading of religious literature for devotional purposes or other devotional activities during school hours or any time they act in their roles as employees of the District. This restriction also applies to athletic coaches and other District personnel who meet with students outside of normal school hours.

Student Religious Activities - Students may pray, read religious literature or engage in other religious activities during non-directed student activity time (e.g., recess, student selected reading time, lunch, etc.). Such activity may not disrupt the educational process or other students.
**District Employee Religious Activities** - When acting in their capacities as District employees, staff members are representatives of the state and, in that capacity, are themselves prohibited from encouraging or soliciting student religious activity or anti-religious activity. Similarly when acting in their official capacities, District staff may not engage in religious activities with their students. However, staff may privately engage in religious activities in an appropriate manner, time and place.

**Pledge of Allegiance** - The Pledge of Allegiance or national songs containing references to God may be recited in school when the primary purpose of such activities is secular. Schools may not force students to recite the Pledge of Allegiance or sing such songs if they believe that such activities constitute a substantial burden to their free exercise of religion. These students may stand, sit quietly or be excused as other students recite the Pledge of Allegiance or sing.

**Graduation Ceremonies** - Graduation ceremonies are school sponsored community events, therefore student initiated and student led prayer at graduation ceremonies is inconsistent with a secular purpose and the diverse make-up of our community.* Speaking parts by students at school-sponsored events, including graduation, may be reviewed by school staff for religious sensitivity. School officials or community members may not lead or promote prayer at graduation ceremonies.

*The law regarding student initiated and student led prayer at graduation ceremonies or other assemblies continues to be a difficult issue for courts and school officials.

**Use of School Facilities**

**Student Religious Groups** - If a school allows any non-curricular student groups (e.g., ski club, chess club, etc.) to use school facilities, the school has created a limited open forum and may not exclude student religious groups from the use of its facilities. These meetings must be student-initiated, student-led, and voluntary and may not be encouraged or discouraged by any District employee. District employees may attend the meetings for the purposes of student management, but may not lead or partake in the meetings. Non-school-related persons may not conduct, control or regularly attend the meetings.

**School Fairs** - A school-sponsored organization (e.g., P.T.A., Band Boosters, etc.) may plan and conduct craft and gift making fairs outside of normal school hours. Fairs may include merchandise and crafts which are religious or nonreligious in nature subject to other provisions of this policy. The District encourages religious diversity in such merchandise and crafts.

**Outside Religious Groups** - A school building may be used for religious activities by members of the community to the same extent that other community groups may use the building. Religious groups may not be favored or discriminated against in matters such as building availability, times or cost. Since outside groups occasionally contract for the use of school facilities, school employees may partake in religious meetings of non-school groups in the school building outside of normal school hours. Schools may choose to exclude all groups from using the building. The District building use policy and procedures (Board Policy 1330) provide additional information.

**Holidays**
The District acknowledges three types of holidays: public, cultural and religious. District staff should gain familiarity with these holidays in order to be prepared to address them within the school/classroom.

**I. Public Holidays** - Public holidays are established by the Michigan School Code (380.1175 MCLA). There are two kinds:
1. Legal Holidays on which school must be closed
   Christmas Day   Memorial Day
   New Year's Day   Labor Day
   Independence Day   Thanksgiving

2. Days to be commemorated in schools
   Lincoln's Birthday   Martin Luther King, Jr. Day
   Columbus Day   Washington's Birthday
   Constitution Day   Veteran's Day
   Patriot's Day

II. Cultural Holidays - Cultural holidays are days on which a particular cultural group honors a tradition. Examples include but are not limited to:
   Children's Day   Kwanzaa
   Chinese New Year   Mother's Day
   Cinco de Mayo   St. Patrick's Day
   Father's Day   Valentine's Day
   Halloween   Holi

III. Religious Holidays - Religious holidays are days considered sacred by a religion. Examples include but are not limited to:
   Bodhi   Passover
   Christmas   'IId al-Adha
   Divali   Rosh Hashanah
   Easter   Vesakha Puja
   Ramadan/IId al-Fitr   Yom Kippur
   Hanukkah

Recognition/Observation – Throughout this section, two kinds of school acknowledgement of holidays are distinguished:

Recognize means to design a situation to gain a non-devotional awareness or appreciation of a holiday through school activities such as study, performances, displays, decorations, parties, parades, etc.

Observe means to design a situation to commemorate or instill commitment to the values and beliefs represented by the holiday.

All public holidays may be observed in school. Cultural holidays may be recognized but not observed. Schools may recognize and teach objectively about religious holidays but may not observe them. Christmas, as both a public holiday on which schools must be closed by law and a religious holiday may be recognized. Its religious aspects may not be observed and its recognition should reflect sensitivity to those who do not celebrate the holiday. Observances of religious holidays outside of school may not be sponsored or supported by the schools. Holidays with religious origins that have become secular (e.g., Valentine's Day or Halloween) may be recognized in school.

Religious Holiday Displays - Decorations and displays containing sacred symbols, artifacts, images or documents are permitted only as part of the academic study or cultural recognition of religious holidays. Displays of this type should be temporary. Holidays recognized with decorations and displays should, throughout the school year, reflect various religious traditions and favor none.

Gift Exchanges - Self-initiated holiday gift giving is permitted in school, but school sponsored gift exchanges are not. School sponsored exchanges of Valentines are permitted.
Personal Expression - Student

Religious Garb - Religious garb may not be singled out for exclusion. Students who wear religious garb must comply with the general dress code unless they can show that such codes substantially inhibit their free exercise of religion.

Distribution of Religious Literature and Proselytizing - Students have the right to distribute religious literature to the same extent as they can distribute other non-curricular literature. School officials may pose limits on the time, place and manner for such distribution as long as the restrictions on religious literature are the same as the restrictions on other literature. School officials should make it clear that the religious literature is not sponsored by the school.

Students have the same right to persuade other students in religious matters as they have in other matters such as politics. Such persuasion may not disrupt the educational process and may not be done in a harassing manner.

Student Assignments - Students may express their religious beliefs in the form of reports, homework and artwork, and such expressions are constitutionally protected. School staff may not reject or correct such submissions simply because they include a religious symbol or address religious themes. Likewise, school staff may not require students to modify, include or excise religious views in their assignments, if germane. These assignments should be judged by ordinary academic standards of substance, relevance, appearance and grammar.

Personal Expression - School Employee

Religious Garb - Religious garb may not be singled out for exclusion. Administrators, teachers and other staff are to present themselves in a professional manner.

Distribution of Religious Literature/Proselytizing - District employees may not distribute religious literature when they are acting as employees of the District. They also may not attempt to persuade students of personal religious convictions when acting in their roles as school employees.

Non-School Personnel

Literature Distribution and Proselytizing on School Grounds - If an open forum for literature distribution is established by allowing non-school personnel to distribute secular literature in common areas of a school building then school officials must also allow non-school personnel to distribute religious literature in the same manner. If secular literature is prohibited, religious literature may also be excluded. School officials may designate appropriate time, place and manner regarding the distribution of literature.

Non-school personnel have the same right to persuade students in religious matters as they have in other matters. Such persuasion may not disrupt the educational process and may not be done in a harassing manner. If other forms of persuasive speech are prohibited, religious persuasion may be excluded also.

Scheduling

Release Time - Release programs where students leave school grounds during regular school hours to receive religious instruction are permissible. Schools must not pay any of the costs for such programs, and all religious instruction must take place outside of school grounds. The student is responsible for making up missed tests and assignments. This will be done without penalty to the student as provided in the Student Code of Conduct.

Religious Holidays

Excused Absences - Students should be allowed a reasonable number of excused absences in order to celebrate religious holidays. Teachers and administrators should make a
sincere effort not to schedule tests, assemblies, field trips, graduation ceremonies, parent conferences, meetings and other special school events on major religious holidays. In the event that a scheduling conflict does occur, make-ups for tests and assignments shall be provided without penalty to the students as provided in the Student Code of Conduct.

School Closure - While the legislature may not mandate school closure on holidays with solely religious bases (e.g., Good Friday, Yom Kippur, etc.), school officials may choose to close schools on such holidays if a large number of absences is anticipated.

School Communications

School Newspapers - School personnel may edit religious messages from school newspapers that a reasonable person might believe were endorsed by the school.

Other School Communications - Schools may not promote or discourage religious activity in any of their communications. This applies to newsletters, calendars and lunch menus sent by administration and teachers, as well as displays on school property which could be viewed as school sponsored.

Implementation

An ongoing advisory committee, representing a broad range of religious traditions, will assist with the interpretation of these procedures.

Appeal Process

These procedures are intended to guide District employees in making decisions regarding religion in the schools. Any decision made by District employees based on these procedures may be appealed to the appropriate District authority through standard communication channels.