

Teaching About Religions

Preamble:

Any discussion of the place of religion in public education must be grounded in the principle of religious liberty or freedom of conscience, particularly as these ideas are embodied in this nation's First Amendment to the Constitution. The religion clauses of the First Amendment states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. This inalienable right to religious liberty depends neither on political authority nor upon any election but is rooted in the inviolable dignity of each person."

The Board of Education of the Dubuque Community School District hereby declares it the policy of the district to educate students honestly, fairly and forthrightly about the history, beliefs, practices, observances, and the impact of world religions as these naturally occur throughout the PK-12 curriculum. In addition, the district will operate as a school system in ways that show no preference for one religion over another nor preference for religion over non-religion or non-religion over religion.

It shall be the responsibility of the Superintendent to ensure that the study about religions is in accordance with the following legal guidelines:

- the activity or study must have a secular purpose
- the primary object of the activity must be one that does not advance or inhibit religion or a particular religion
- the activity must not foster excessive governmental entanglement with religion

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OVERVIEW

Policy 6106 stipulates that the Superintendent has the formal and legal authority to apply and interpret its stipulations to the operation of the district.

It is equally important that all administrators, teaching staff, and support staff take a shared sense of responsibility in making this policy consistent and effective. This responsibility includes, a) active understanding of this policy and operational guidelines, b) continued learning about the essentials of the world's religions, especially those directly included in the district's curriculum and those representing the student population in the district.

By doing so, students' education will be enhanced through their prudent, age appropriate and accurate interaction with the beliefs, practices and impact on society of the world's religions, both in the past and today.

A. CURRICULUM AND TEACHING PRACTICES

Overview

1. Decisions concerning the teaching about religions in the curricula will be made within the parameters of current constitutional guidelines based on judicial review.
2. An understanding of peoples and their culture requires an exposure to their views, values and behaviors based on religious beliefs.
3. The study about religions emphasizes the importance of respect and mutual understanding. In doing so, these guidelines intend to be congruent with established policies infusing multicultural and global education into the curricula.
4. Teachers and staff need to show sensitivity for the religions and non-religious beliefs, attitudes and feelings of students.

B. CURRICULUM CONTENT

1. Student learning goals and objectives will be enriched when the role religions have played in history, culture, the arts and contemporary world are naturally described and explained in the published PK-12 district curriculum.
2. Teaching about religions should take place whenever it is essential in maximizing learner achievement. Curricula should reflect the religious perspectives that are integral in

various content areas, including, but not limited to, language arts, social studies, music and the visual and performing arts.

3. Study about religions should explore a broad range, historically and globally, of religious beliefs, practices and values.

4. Teachers are encouraged, in accordance with the discipline taught and acknowledging the developmental level of the learners, to present multiple perspectives in the area of religious, spiritual belief and challenges to those beliefs, (e.g., human creation stories and theories).

5. In science studies, teachers may acknowledge the beliefs and feelings of students regarding creation. Science, however, is a limited discipline which focuses on the study of the natural world based on verifiable evidence.

C. CURRICULUM RESOURCES

1. The district, in accordance with the district selection policy (#6207) and accompanying administrative guidelines, will select books, audio-visual materials, computer programs, religious documents, and other supplemental materials that include descriptive data about religions and that do so in a manner that fosters description, fairness, accuracy and multiple perspectives.

2. The adequacy and appropriateness of instructional materials in all areas of the curriculum relative to the role of religious and spiritual belief and challenges to those beliefs needs regular review by appropriate study groups. Special attention needs to be given to the areas of language arts, social studies, art and music. Appropriate instructional materials should not be deleted because religious sensibilities might be offended. The decision to include or exclude the use of such materials must be based on secular rather than religious reasons.

3. As a part of the curriculum, religious literature, music, drama and the arts may be included, provided they are intrinsic to the learning experience in the particular field of study in which it is being used and is presented to explain or describe an essential learning concept.

4. Teachers may invite resource persons to supplement various units of learning. All resource persons will be given operational guidelines prior to a classroom presentation.

D. TEACHING PRACTICES

1. Teaching about religions will be descriptive and conducted in a learning environment free of advocacy or indoctrination.

2. A genuine learning environment respects learners as individuals who hold beliefs, both religious and non-religious, that make a difference in their lives. Students need not share with faculty or staff their personal religious affiliation or lack of affiliation.

3. Students will not be singled out nor identified on the basis of either religious or non-religious affiliation nor asked to be the representative of their particular religious perspective.

4. Staff, in their interactions with students, will advocate no religious or theological viewpoint. Classroom activities involving studies about religion will be from a multiple perspective approach.

5. Staff need to avoid overgeneralizing, oversimplifying, or denigrating a religious group's beliefs or practices. It needs to be remembered that a faith community's view or practice may have changed over time.

6. Sound academic knowledge is prerequisite of effective teaching about religions.

7. Teachers should exercise empathy and sensitivity for differing religious points of view.

8. When religious perspectives are significant in understanding human behavior or events, they shall be presented in a balanced and fair way.

9. Teaching and learning about religions will strive for awareness of beliefs/non-beliefs and understanding of the diversity of religions without comparing them to any one religion as normative.

10. School classrooms are not appropriate settings for religious proselytizing, worship, celebration, or non-instructional religious display by school officials during their contract day.

11. If an educator is asked by a student to identify his/her own religious identity in response to an issue or event, the educator may do so if he/she chooses to. However, the educator should do this briefly and avoid any lengthy discussion which might have the appearance of proselytizing.

12. Students may choose to create artwork with religious symbols but teachers will not encourage or discourage students who choose to include religious symbols in their creations.

13. Teachers will accept any homework, artwork or written assignment which includes a student's religious convictions if the work fulfills all other criteria for the assignment.

E. RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS/OBSERVANCES

1. Religious holidays and observances, occurring in society outside of school, offer opportunities to teach about religions in both elementary and secondary schools. Teaching about religious holidays and observances, which is permissible, is different from celebrating them, which is not permissible. Recognition of and information about such holidays and observances should focus on the origin, history, and commonly agreed upon meaning of such. An informational approach, neither advancing nor inhibiting religion or a particular religion, will foster among students understanding and mutual respect.

Programs and displays involving a religious observance will serve an educational purpose for all students.

2. The district will follow accepted local, state and national customs in regard to ceremonies and observances.

3. The use of religious symbols or symbols associated with religious observances are permitted as a teaching aid or resource. Such symbols are to be displayed as an example of the cultural and religious heritage of the observance and be temporary in nature. These symbols include crosses, menorahs, crescents, crèches or a Star of David, symbols of Native American religions or any other symbol directly affiliated with a religious holiday. These may not be used as decorations.

4. Items such as Christmas trees, jack-o-lanterns, and valentines which are primarily cultural and secular, are permissible. Educators and staff, however, will use discretion and sensitivity in their use.

F. SCHOOL PROGRAMS

1. There shall be no district-initiated production or sponsorship of religious devotions or celebrations whether on or off school premises. For example, nativity pageants or plays portraying the Chanukah story are not appropriate in the public school setting while an English madrigal, a secular composition frequently performed during the winter holidays, is appropriate.

2. Programs, parties, or performances will not be used as forums for religious worship, such as devotional readings or the recitations of prayers.

3. Music, art, literature, and drama having religious themes (including traditional carols, seasonal songs and classical music) shall be permitted when presented in an informational and proportional manner without indoctrination. Religious content included in student performances

shall be selected on the basis of its independent educational merit and shall seek to give exposure to a variety of religious customs, cultures, beliefs, and forms of expression.

4. Persons invited into the district's schools will not use the opportunity to proselytize on behalf of religion or any single religion. Presentations by any person utilized as a guest speaker, performer, or facilitator will be secular in nature or descriptive when matters pertaining to religion are the topic.

Any materials used by a guest resource person will be used to enhance established curricular goals and will be descriptive in nature regarding issues of religion.

G. RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION BY STUDENTS AND STAFF

1. General

- a. Decisions regarding student/staff school expression will be made within the parameters of current constitutional guidelines based on judicial review.
- b. The district enjoys substantial discretion in adopting policies related to student and staff dress. Student dress guidelines, in general, are addressed in district policy #5200.
- c. Students and staff have no federal right to be exempted from religiously neutral and generally applicable school dress rules based on their religious beliefs or practices. However, neither the district nor any of its employees will single out religious attire, in general, or attire of a particular religion for prohibition or regulation.

2. Prevention of Discrimination or Harassment Based on Religious Belief or Disbelief

The district will utilize current policies and administrative guidelines related to multicultural education, global education and discrimination/harassment prevention to provide for high quality teaching about religions and to prevent incidents of discrimination or harassment based on religious belief or affiliation, spiritual belief or practice or absence of affiliation with an organized religion. All incidents of harassment or discrimination based on religion will be reported on the district "Discrimination/Harassment Incident Report Form" and submitted to the director of equity in a timely fashion.

3. Student Distribution of Religious Literature

Students have a right to distribute religious literature on the same basis as they are permitted to distribute secular literature unrelated to school curriculum or activities. Schools can impose the same reasonable restrictions on time, place and manner of distribution on all

literature distributed in the school. Literature deemed obscene, defamatory or disruptive to the educational environment may not be distributed. School officials may not use different standards for the regulation of religious literature. All requests for mass distribution of any literature to students or staff within an attendance center will be approved in accordance with Board Policy #6201.

4. Prayer/Religious Expression by Students

- a. Students have the right to pray individually or in groups, or to discuss their religious views with peers as long as the activity is not disruptive to the educational process and does not infringe on the rights of others through any form of coercion or harassment.
- b. Students may read religious literature or pray before meals or exams. This activity is voluntary in nature. The school may not provide structured time or encouragement to participate in such activity.
- c. A student will not be forced to recite the Pledge of Allegiance if that student objects on religious, philosophical or other grounds.

5. Prayer/Religious Expression by Staff

- a. School staff is required to be neutral concerning religion while carrying out their duties as employees.
- b. Employees may engage in prayer or similar private religious activity during duty free and non-contractual hours at school only outside the presence of students.
- c. School employees, when acting in their capacity as representatives of the district, are prohibited from encouraging or discouraging student engagement in religious practices.
- d. Staff may not engage in religious activities with students nor distribute religious literature to students.
- e. Staff may not lead or participate in on-campus religious activity while carrying out their activities as an employee.
- f. Staff may lead a neutral moment of silence, as long as prayer is not promoted over other forms of quiet contemplation.
- g. School staff is permitted to wear non-obtrusive jewelry such as a cross or Star of David.

- h. Staff may distribute literature to their peers on the same basis they are allowed to distribute other materials. Supervisors must abide by district discrimination/harassment policies when distributing material to those under their supervision.
6. Religious Attire of Students and Staff
- a. Students and staff who are required by their beliefs to wear religious attire such as headscarves or yarmulkes are permitted to do so in school.
 - b. Students may display religious messages on items of clothing to the same extent that they are permitted to display other comparable non-religious messages.
 - c. There will be no suppression of any particular religious message worn by students.
 - d. Staff will not wear clothing with a proselytizing message.
 - e. The school principal shall have discretion to make determinations on a specific item of attire. This decision will ensure that compliance of any religious attire is consistent with the enforcement any other secular attire as stipulated in policy #5200.
 - f. The school principal's decision needs to reflect the student's right to express his/her religious faith.
 - g. The student or parent/guardian in this regard will address disagreements about the principal's decision to the principal. The student or parent/guardian should follow established district procedures if a mutually satisfactory resolution is not arrived at.
7. Religious Clubs
- a. In accordance with the Equal Access Act of 1984 the district will allow students in secondary schools to form and lead religiously based student organizations/clubs during the school day under the same guidelines used for non-curricular (not related to any course offered in school) organizations/clubs meeting during non-instructional time, including lunchtime. Such meetings shall be voluntary and student-initiated.
 - b. Student religious organizations/clubs will have access to school facilities and communication vehicles, including school bulletin boards, intercom system, and school newspapers and web sites on the same basis as other non-curriculum related student groups.
 - c. A religious organization/club activity may include a prayer service, readings from sacred text or other worship exercise.

- d. A responsible school employee shall act as a sponsor for all student clubs. Such sponsors are to attend meetings only in a non-participatory capacity. Non-school persons will not direct, control or regularly attend meetings of student religious organizations/clubs.
- e. Student meetings may not materially and substantially interfere with the orderly conduct of educational activities within the school.
- f. Decisions regarding student clubs will be made within the parameters of the Equal Access Act, based on judicial review.
- g. Middle schools that allow non-curricular student clubs will abide by the terms of the Equal Access Act and the above provisions of district policy, even though not recognized as secondary schools in the Act.

H. SCHOOL OPERATIONS

1. The district is committed to religious liberty for people of all faiths and none. Recognizing that diversity is enriching to the educational experience of all students, the district intends to protect and accommodate the religious needs of both students and employees of the district.

2. The district will prepare a school calendar to minimize conflicts with religious observances. The scheduling of school examinations, assemblies, field trips, graduation exercises, and school programs for parents/guardians on the eve of and the date of major religious observances will be avoided when possible.

I. SCHOOL IMMUNIZATION

The district will comply with Iowa Administrative Code (1993) regarding immunization of persons attending elementary or secondary schools as follows:

“A religious exemption may be granted to an applicant who is an adherent or member of a recognized religious denomination and in which the tenets and practices of the religious denomination conflict with immunizations. A certificate of immunization exemption for religious reasons shall indicate the religion of the applicant and be signed by the applicant, or if a minor, by the parent or guardian or legally authorized representative. The certificate of immunization exemption for religious reasons is valid only when notarized. Religious exemptions shall become null and void during times of emergency as determined by the state board of health and declared by the commissioner of public health.”

J. CRISIS COUNSELING

The district and its schools may seek the assistance of a wide range of qualified counselors, including religious leaders; to assist school employed counselors in helping students and adults cope with the crisis at hand. Religious leaders may be asked to be one element of a comprehensive counseling initiative in a crisis.

When counseling during a crisis, religious leaders need to be cognizant that a public school is not a place for proselytizing or other overt religious activity. No student will be compelled or coerced to speak with representatives of a religious institution.

K. SCHOOL GRADUATION

1. The district will not include either an invocation or benediction as part of high school graduation ceremonies. A school may choose to utilize a moment of silence for reflection in the graduation ceremony.

2. An optional baccalaureate service, sponsored by the local community, can be conducted for students who wish to attend. The school may announce the baccalaureate in the same way it announces other community events. A privately sponsored baccalaureate will be regulated under the same terms of use or rent as other community groups who use school facilities during non-school times.

L. STUDENT ABSENCES

1. The district will recognize a student's absence from school on a religious observance as an excused absence, without penalty in academic or activity standing. As with all excused absences, it is the responsibility of the student or parent/guardian to communicate with the appropriate school personnel when a student absence will occur due to conflict with religious observance or activity.

2. The district will provide a procedure for religious-based exclusion from a school program. This procedure will be published for all parents/guardians on an annual basis. Building principals are responsible for informing parents/guardians of upcoming events in a timely fashion so a parent/guardian can utilize the procedure.

M. PROCEDURES FOR RELIGION-BASED EXCLUSION OF STUDENT FROM A SCHOOL PROGRAM OR ACTIVITY:

Whenever possible, the district will accommodate the request of parents and students for excusal from classroom discussions or activities for religious reasons. If focused on a specific

discussion, assignment, or activity, such a request should be routinely granted in order to strike a balance between the student's religious freedom and the school's interest in providing a well-rounded education.

Parents who wish to have their child excluded from a school program because of religious beliefs must inform the school principal in writing. A school program will be defined as the published curriculum, special events (either all school or grade/course), or specified presentations of persons not regularly employed by the district. The Board of Education authorizes the administration to allow the exclusion if it is not disruptive to the education program. Further, the exclusion must not interfere with other school district operations. In notifying the principal, the parents shall abide by the following procedures.

1. the notice shall be in writing
2. the request for exclusion shall be based on religious beliefs
3. the request for exclusion shall state which activity or studies violate these beliefs
4. the request for exclusion shall state a proposed alternate activity or study

The principal shall have discretion to make this determination. The factors the principals shall consider when a student requests to be excluded from a program or activity because of religious beliefs include, but are not limited to, staff availability, space availability, numbers of students who wish to be excluded, a principal-approved alternative course of study or activity, and whether the program or activity is required for promotion to the next grade level or for graduation or by state standards.

A copy of a "Request for Exclusion from School Program based on Religious Beliefs" is available at each school and at the Forum. Parents/guardians will be apprised of its presence in general opening of school materials mailing.

Students who are allowed to be excluded from a program or activity which violates their religious beliefs shall be required to do an alternate supervised activity or study. Situations which result in substantial disagreement between a parent/guardian and a principal will be referred to the director of equity for mediated resolution. Failure to reach resolution will result in a decision by the Superintendent.

N. STAFF LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

The district will provide and encourage staff participation in in-service workshops, study groups, fieldwork, and community events for teaching staff to enhance content understanding of

world religions. This education will also include explanation of the district policy (#6106), best practices in teaching about religions in the public schools.

The district will identify, purchase and disseminate student learning and professional materials on world religions' beliefs, practices and special features and appropriate teaching approaches for teaching about religions in both elementary and secondary schools.

The district, in conjunction with individual schools, will seek to provide resource speakers and programs for both staff and student audiences.

Student Food Services

The district will seek to structure a student menu which offers a wide variety of foods throughout the school year without specifically observing any special religious observance. Every attempt is made to ~~insure~~ **ensure** a wide variety of food, within available resources, should a student desire to observe their specific religious beliefs.

Use of DCSD facilities by Religious Organizations

Use of Dubuque Community School District facilities by religious organizations before or after school hours will be accorded in the same manner as secular organizations.

Schools or the district are permitted to use the facilities of religious organizations, provided the activity has a secular educational purpose. In the case of leased space, the leased space is, in effect, a public school facility and must operate as a public school facility.