

RECOGNITION OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND CUSTOMS

Introduction

The United States and North Carolina Constitutions guarantee religious freedom and prohibit government agencies from engaging in any activity that either promotes or criticizes religious beliefs or practices. These constitutional provisions are based on the nation's conviction that religious freedom is a basic human right and that undue government involvement in religious matters can be disruptive within the community, can infringe upon individuals' religious freedom, and can undermine the integrity of both government and religion. These principles are particularly important in the context of public education, which includes in its vital mission the introduction of impressionable children - through classroom teaching, extracurricular activities, and the living examples of staff conduct - to the history, culture, and fundamental values of our nation.

In keeping with the letter and spirit of these constitutional principles, the Pitt County Board of Education seeks to foster among all students and personnel the attitudes of appreciation, sensitivity, and respect for the rich religious diversity of our community and nation, and to accommodate student religious beliefs and practices whenever educationally feasible and constitutionally permissible. In addition, the Pitt County Board of Education prohibits school personnel from either promoting or criticizing religious beliefs or practices while acting in their official capacities.

Specific Policies

The following specific policies are issued to provide guidance to school personnel, parents, students and the community about the bearing of these constitutional principles on school activities.

1. Prayer: As a personal choice, students may pray or read religious literature, including the Bible, during the school day when they are not involved in classroom work or other school activities, as long as they do not interfere with the school program or infringe on the rights of others. However, school personnel, while acting in their official capacities, may not require, support, or encourage students to pray or engage in devotional reading of religious literature, or lead students in such activities.
2. Distribution of Religious Literature: Neither school personnel nor visitors may distribute religious literature on school property, except that school personnel may distribute religious literature when such materials are appropriate educational resources, as discussed in provision 10 of this policy. These restrictions do not affect the rights of students under the First Amendment to distribute literature, including religious literature, on school property.
3. Prayer during Official Functions: School Board meetings and similar ceremonial public functions may include prayer as an invocation and/or benediction. Individuals leading such prayers should be sensitive to the religious beliefs of others.

4. Speakers: In scheduling speakers for classes and school assembly programs, schools may not discriminate on the basis of the religious beliefs or role of the speaker. Speakers may not lead students in prayer or indoctrinate them in a particular religious or anti-religious belief or practice during such classes or assembly programs.

5. Baccalaureate Services: Parents, students, and other groups may organize and conduct voluntary baccalaureate services. Notice of any such services may be given by the schools in the same manner as given for other community activities. However, the schools may not sponsor or conduct baccalaureate services, and such services may not be held on school property during the school day.

6. Extracurricular Student Groups: Students in grades 9 through 12 may establish non-curriculum-related groups and conduct meetings on such property during non-instructional time in the school day (before instruction begins, after instruction ends, or during other non-instructional time), regardless of the religious, political, philosophical, or other content of the view expressed during such meetings. Such meetings may not materially and substantially interfere with the orderly conduct of educational activities in the school and may not violate the law in any way. Membership in such student groups and participation in their activities is voluntary. Participation in their activities may not be limited by race, sex, religion, creed, or national origin. Students seeking to form a group must notify their school's principal, who may establish reasonable rules about the time, place, and manner of group activities.

School employees acting in their official capacities may not promote, lead, or participate in the meetings, though a school employee may be present at the meetings to maintain order and discipline and to protect the general well-being of students and staff. School employees may not influence the form or content of any prayer or other religious activity at such meetings. Non-school persons may not direct, conduct, control, or regularly attend activities of such groups.

No public funds may be spent on behalf of such groups, except for the incidental cost of providing space for their meetings.

7. Use of School Facilities by Community Groups: Religious groups may use school facilities on the same basis as other community groups.

8. Student Absence for Religious Holiday Observance: A student's absence for the purpose of observing a religious holiday shall be considered an excused absence as long as the student submits written notice from a parent or guardian in advance of such an absence. No academic penalty may be imposed for such an absence, and a student has the right to make up work and examinations missed during such an absence.

9. School Observance of Religious Holidays: Holidays that have both a religious and a secular basis may be observed in the schools in a non-indoctrinating manner. When such a holiday is observed, its historical and contemporary values and origin should be explained in an unbiased and objective manner without sectarian indoctrination. Music, art, literature and drama having religious themes or bases are permitted as part of the curriculum for school-sponsored activities and programs if presented in a prudent and objective manner and as a traditional part of the cultural and religious heritage of the particular holiday.

In the initial year of this policy, programs and lesson plans prepared for holidays with a religious or secular basis shall be submitted for review to the Superintendent's office to ensure that the spirit and intent of the law and Board policy is met.

Students whose religious beliefs preclude them from participating in such activities or programs may be excused from such participation, and school personnel should respond to excusal requests with sensitivity. A student who wishes to be excused for religious reasons must submit written notice from a parent or guardian in advance of such an event.

Religious symbols such as a cross, menorah, crescent, Star of David, crèche, symbols of Native American religions, or other symbols related to a religious holiday may be used as a teaching aid or resource provided such symbols are displayed only temporarily and as an example of the cultural and religious heritage of the holiday. Examples of such holidays that may be observed include Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, Passover, Hanukkah, St. Valentine's Day and St. Patrick's Day. The school unit's calendar should be prepared so as to minimize conflicts with religious holidays of all faiths.

10. Academic Study about Religion:

a) Teachers may lead students in non-indoctrinating academic study about religion and may use religious literature (such as the Bible) as material for such instruction, when educationally relevant to the curriculum, such as in courses about literature, history, social studies, humanities, art, music, and comparative religion. Indeed, since religion has always been central to human experience, a complete education should give students an understanding of the role of religion in the history and culture of our nation and the world.

Such instruction must be carried out in a neutral, non-indoctrinating way. That is, it may neither promote nor criticize particular religious beliefs or practices. Illustrative examples of such instruction include teaching about the religious motivation of many early settlers and later immigrants for coming to America, the influence of religion on art and music, the religious beliefs of prominent figures in America history, the relevance of religion to slavery and its abolition and to civil rights movements, the role of religion in contemporary American life, and religious references in such national symbols and practices as the national motto and the pledge of allegiance.

b) Students may express their personal beliefs and values in classroom discussion, written work, or other school activities whenever such expression is relevant to the subject matter and educational objectives of the activity.

11. Excusal from School Activities on Religious Grounds: The Pitt County Board of Education seeks to assure the use of sound educational policy, course content, teaching methods, materials, and other activities appropriate to students' age levels. Nevertheless, the Board recognizes that parents and students may object to some aspects of the curriculum or to other school activities on religious grounds. In keeping with the Board's appreciation of our community's religious diversity, school personnel shall seek to accommodate with sensitivity requests for alternative assignments or excusal of students from activities on religious grounds. Such requests are to be granted liberally as long as they are educationally feasible. A student seeking an alternative assignment or excusal must submit written notice from a parent or guardian in advance of such activity.