

2270 RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Preamble

The Board of Education recognizes that the place of religion in public schools must be grounded in the principle of freedom of conscience, particularly as it is embodied in this nation's First Amendment to the Constitution which states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."

Teaching about religion, then, must adhere to the American experiment which cherishes beliefs that are a matter of conviction rather than coercion. In accordance with the district's mission statement, staff members share with others the responsibility to nurture the children of our community in a caring environment that values diversity and promotes a culture of respect. This responsibility extends beyond the Board of Education and staff to include parents and the community as a whole - all of whom have a shared responsibility toward the future success and well-being of our children.

This mission is further supported by the district's diversity statement: "The district recognizes and values the interconnectedness of humanity and looks to the staff to lead this initiative. It is our vision that all people will be treated with equality, dignity, and respect; that all pupils will be educated to understand, accept and value all members of the world community; and that the community at large will join with us in support of this mission."

The Board of Education also recognizes that the school district represents a diverse community with a variety of cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. The Board believes that it is a collective responsibility to foster mutual understanding and respect for the rights of all individuals regarding their beliefs, values, and customs. A genuine and broad program of education is furthered by advancement of pupils' knowledge about our society's cultural, ethnic and religious diversity.

Instructional Programs

The instructional programs must remain consistent with law, as interpreted by State and federal courts, and in accordance with the State and federal constitutions. Instructional programs that teach about religion do not violate the religious neutrality of the public schools. The approach to religion must be academic and not devotional.

Hopewell Valley Regional School District's instructional programs aim to broaden pupils' understanding of, and respect for, the many beliefs and customs of our nation's diverse heritage and the world at large. Programs that teach about religion are geared toward teaching pupils the role of religion in the historical, cultural, literary and social development of the United States and other nations. Teaching about religion is a constituent part of New Jersey's Core Content Standards and is therefore included across the curriculum.

The District's strategic plan includes goals that guide our teaching about religion:

1. To engage pupils actively in the learning process while they are working to achieve their full potential as competent, respectful, socially responsible citizens.
2. To provide a wide array of instructional programs that assure core competencies and nurture the unique talents of the individual and that are regularly revised to meet current needs and anticipated challenges.

The Board directs that no religious belief or non-belief shall be promoted in the regular curriculum or in district-sponsored courses, programs or activities, and that none shall be disparaged. Public schools may neither instill nor inhibit religion. Thus, teachers will educate pupils about a variety of religions as they occur naturally in a curriculum such as social studies, literature or the arts, but may not practice, promote or disparage any religious belief or non-belief. It is essential that teaching be conducted with sensitivity to the diversity of the pupil population. This being stated, pupils are free to express religious belief or non-belief in classroom discussions, assignments and other school settings.

Religious Holidays

Recognition of religious holidays over the course of the school year will be limited to activities and displays that serve the needs of educating pupils about cultural practices. These activities and displays shall be designed with sensitivity to the diversity of the pupil body. It is important that no pupil feel excluded or forcibly identified with a religion not his or her own.

Balance is desirable and may be implemented in different ways according to the class and the season. To the extent that religious holidays are manifested in activities and displays over the course of a school year, a variety of religions shall be represented.

Consistent with applicable law, pupils may be excused from school, from classroom discussions or activities and from extracurricular activities including athletics, for religious reasons.

Implementation and Dissemination

Consistent with its goal of "creating an effective open communications process that values all voices and creates a trusting, positive relationship with the community," the Board of Education shall ensure that parents and staff members receive information regarding this policy. The Superintendent will provide initial and periodic training to all instructional staff regarding the proper implementation of this policy and best practices regarding religion in the schools.

Through implementation of this policy, the Board seeks to promote understanding and respect for the diversity present in the community and throughout the world.

U.S. Consti. Amend. 1

U.S. Department of Education - Guidance on Constitutionally Protected Prayer in Public
Elementary and Secondary Schools – February 7, 2003

N.J. Consti. (1947) Art. 1, para. 4

N.J.S.A. 18A:35-4.6 et seq.; 18A:36-16