

POLICY: E45

WARNED: 10.12.20

ADOPTED: \_\_\_\_\_

EFFECTIVE: \_\_\_\_\_

## ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE SCHOOLS

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The primary mission of the public school is education. The proper role of religion in the public school lies in its academic value and not in the appropriation or endorsement of any particular religion or belief system, nor of religion over non-religion. By “academic value” is meant the meaning of religious systems and the role they have played in the development of human history and culture.

This policy reserves the school’s role of deepening understanding of humanity as a whole, while preserving the family’s role of guiding children in a particular belief system if it chooses to do so. This policy also safeguards the function of school as a meeting place for children and families of different backgrounds and beliefs. The application of this policy will enhance our understanding of and respect for differences in religious beliefs and practices, and deepen our understanding of our common humanity. In furtherance of this policy:

1. All engagement with religion, whether in the form of teaching about a religious holiday, the role of religion in history, school programs, or the academic study of religion itself, must be done solely with education and understanding as its goal.
2. Curriculum planning should include the study of religion, where appropriate, as an important part of a complete education, which can enhance student understanding and appreciation of diverse religious beliefs and practices.
3. Our schools will be sensitive, respectful and responsive to the experiences of diverse religious cultures and traditions.
4. Staff will be provided information, guidance and specific advice regarding the implementation of this policy and the current rulings regarding secularism and/or the role of religion in schools.
5. **Students intending to miss school for religious holidays shall notify the school of their intention, at least on day in advance of their absence, and the absence shall be considered and excused absence.**

### Considerations

#### **What not to do**

- Schedule important school events, (i.e. – open house) on significant holidays of community religious groups, (i.e. Yom Kippur, Good Friday).
- Recognize holidays in an overly religious way;
- Celebrate holidays that are purely religious in nature, as opposed to holidays that combine religious and secular traditions;

- Teach religious values in holiday activities;
- Hold holiday activities that rise to the level of religious practice;
- Require students to participate in activities related to a religious holiday;
- Impose rigid attendance policies that have the effect of penalizing students who are absent from school for religious holidays;
- Set up permanent religious displays; or
- Hold a holiday music program that includes only religious music.

### **What schools may do**

- Schedule school breaks to coincide with religious holidays;
- Acknowledge religious holidays, as long as activities emphasize secular instruction about religious traditions; and as long as activities include diverse religious traditions;
- Hold programs that include religious themes, as long as the programs emphasize cultural, rather than spiritual, aspects; and as long as they reflect the diversity of religions and/or traditions;
- Perform religious music as part of a program that includes secular music or music from a variety of religious traditions;
- Set up temporary displays about religious holidays, as long as the displays acknowledge the diversity of traditions and are used to teach about the holidays;
- Hold a performance that features music related to religious holidays, such as Christmas carols and secular seasonal songs, as long as the concert isn't dominated by religious music; and as long as the concert reflects the diversity of the community.
- Hold activities related to religious holidays even if somebody might be offended. As with other curriculum controversies, mere exposure to ideas that may be objectionable to some people does not create a reason for elimination, and schools cannot effectively teach if they are forced to avoid anything controversial.

### **Tips for Planning Activities**

#### **Teachers planning such activities are encouraged to answer the following questions:**

Is this activity designed to, or might it have the effect of, either promoting or inhibiting a particular religion or religion in general?

How does this activity serve the academic goals of the course or the educational mission of the school?

Will any student or parent be made to feel like an outsider, not a full member of the community, by this activity or the way it is being taught or presented?

Do I include activities to teach about diverse religious holidays at various times of the year?

Am I prepared to teach about the religious meaning of this holiday in a way that enriches students' understanding of religion, history or cultures?

When I display student work that contains religious symbols, signs or content, do I include an explanation of how this work connects with current studies? Which Vermont Standard, Vital Result or Learning Opportunity is addressed by this activity?

