

TEACHING ABOUT RELIGION IN THE SCHOOLS

The purpose of this policy is to promote educational excellence in the Thompson School District with respect to teaching about religion and other religious issues. The teaching about religion and all religious content is to be consistent with the district's educational program and student learning objectives.

Religious institutions and orientation are central to human experience, past and present. The study of religions, religious art and the activities and effects of religious institutions in a secular, academic context is entirely appropriate. It is inherent to the teaching of history, literature, social studies, intercultural education, human relations, art and music to include what various religions and religious movements have contributed to these fields. To remove all such references from the curriculum would result in an incomplete and inaccurate educational program.

The Board recognizes that one of the school system's educational goals is to advance student knowledge and appreciation of the role that religious heritage has played in the social, cultural and historical development of civilization. Therefore, the Board endorses the study of religion in an objective, respectful and cross-cultural manner and the study of the American tradition of religious liberty as an integral part of the educational program.

Factual and objective teaching about religion, the impact of religion and religious based ideas and ideals may be included in classroom instruction consistent with the district's educational program and student learning objectives. Such instruction should be limited to teaching about religion and not become religious instruction. All instruction must be conducted in an open, objective and respectful manner. Time spent on the subject shall be in proportion to its educational value.

Neutrality

The United States and Colorado Constitutions and Colorado statutes require that no activity of the Thompson R2-J Schools shall be permitted which has the purpose or effect of advancing or inhibiting religious belief or nonbelief, nor shall any such activity discriminate between systems of religious belief or forms of worship.

In order to ensure that the district upholds constitutional standards within the religiously neutral role assigned to public schools, the following questions should be asked of each school sponsored activity involving the use of religious material:

1. Does the activity have a secular purpose? Activities that do not have a secular purpose are prohibited.
2. Is the primary effect of the activity one that advances or inhibits religion? If the primary effect of the activity advances or inhibits religion, it shall be prohibited.
3. Does the activity involve an excessive entanglement between the school and a religious organization? If the activity does cause such an entanglement, it shall be prohibited.

School district personnel should encourage all students and staff members to respect the religious views of others. School district personnel should foster understanding and mutual respect among students and parents, whether it involves race, culture, economic background or religious beliefs. In that spirit of understanding and respect, students may be excused, without

penalty from the school, from participating in instruction, work or activities that are contrary to their religious beliefs, unless there are issues of overriding concern that require the student's participation. In order to receive an exemption, the student's parent or guardian must submit to the building principal a written request specifically identifying the portion of the instruction, work or activity for which the exemption is sought and the basis for the request. Such excuse shall not provide an exemption from the other approved requirements defined in school district policy. Specifically, activities must be tested as to whether they meet educational goals.

Teaching About Religion and Student Programs

All school activities shall serve a primarily educational or cultural purpose. Time spent in preparation for these activities shall be in proportion to their educational value. Official school assemblies and graduation exercises involving the direct participation of non-students must be justified on the basis of independent educational merit. Students who participate in official public school groups will not be required to perform at events of religious worship. Performances of music and the arts that include religious content are permissible so long as there is an independent secular educational purpose for each selection and the entire program provides appropriate balance.

A statement of purpose may be distributed at school programs and performances, which include material of religious origin. The form of such a statement should be substantially the following: *This (program/performance) is presented for the purpose of helping students and the public become aware of, understand and appreciate human culture, history and religious diversity. By including these materials, the Thompson School District does not endorse any form of religious belief or systems denying or objecting to the belief, nor does it intend to disparage any such beliefs.*

Student Expression of Religious Belief

Students are free to express religious belief or nonbelief in discussion, compositions, art forms, music, speech and debate so long as such expression is consistent with ordinary expectations of student conduct.

No form of prayer, worship or expression of religious belief or disbelief shall be prescribed or sanctioned in fact or in appearance by the schools. This shall not, however, be construed to restrict students from engaging in spontaneous discussion about religion, personal prayer or personal meditation which is not disruptive of the educational process and does not infringe upon the privacy rights of others.

Student-initiated religious groups or clubs shall be subject to Policies JJA and KF.

School Visitors

School visitors are required to report to the office of the school principal at the time of entering a school building (Policy KI, Visitors to the Schools).

Uniform written rules regulating visitors to the schools are to be based upon the need for preserving the environment necessary to effectively conduct the educational process.

School visitors may not enter school grounds for the purpose of proselytizing students to affiliate with a religion.

Clergy or other representatives of religious groups may provide counseling to students during school hours in emergency situations upon request of the student and with the prior consent of the principal or designee. Routine counseling should be scheduled outside of school hours and off school grounds.

Baccalaureate Services, Invocations and Benedictions

Neither the school district nor any school of the district authorizes, sponsors or conducts religious services. The school district shall not conduct or sanction any baccalaureate service nor shall it include religious invocations, benedictions or formal prayer at such school-sponsored events.

Parents and other groups may organize and conduct baccalaureate services; however, the school district shall not be identified, explicitly or implicitly, as sponsoring or endorsing such services. Reasonable caution should be exercised to ensure school or district neutrality relative to baccalaureate programs. Efforts should be made periodically to clarify the school's neutrality with parent leaders and/or organizations sponsoring religious programs.

Staff Religious Groups

Faculty or staff groups are not to use school facilities for purposes of group prayer, testimony or worship, except in their capacity as private citizens during non-school hours pursuant to district Policy KG, Community Use of School Facilities. School bulletin boards, school mail or school materials are not be used for such purposes.

Adopted July 7, 1999

Cross ref: Title VI (Accommodations)
 IKFB, Graduation Exercises
 IMI, Exemptions from Required Instruction
 JH, Student Absences
 JJA, Student Organizations
 KG, Community Use of School Facilities
 KI, Visitors to the Schools
 KE, Public Complaints