

ABINGTON SCHOOL DISTRICT
ABINGTON, PENNSYLVANIA

SUPERINTENDENT'S
ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURE

REGARDING: **Religion in the Public
Schools**

Section: **Curriculum**

Effective Date: August 25, 1998

Reissued: 8/26/08, 2/28/17

See Also: Related Board Policy
School Code Sections
1515, 1516.1, 1546;
20 U.S.C. Sections 4071-
4074, and 6301 et seq.

The following guidelines relative to the implementation of Board Policy Statement regarding Religion in the Public Schools are based on Section 9524 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act ("ESEA") of 1965, as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) enacted on December 10, 2015, and the United States Department of Education publication "Guidance on Constitutionally Protected Prayer in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools," dated February 7, 2003.

I. STUDENT RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

A. Prayer

Students have the right to engage in individual or group prayer and religious discussion during the school day. Students may read their Bibles or other scriptures, say grace before meals, and pray before tests. Student individual or group prayer and discussions regarding religion may not be disruptive to other students. Such activities may not be used to coerce or harass other students.

Students also may participate in before- and after-school events with religious content, such as a "See You at the Flagpole" gathering, on the same terms as they participate in other non-curriculum activities on school premises. School officials may neither encourage nor discourage participation in such events.

B. Student Assignments

Students may express their beliefs about religion in the form of homework, art work, and other written and oral assignments such as book reports. Such homework and class work will be judged by ordinary academic standards of substance and relevance. Teachers may not reject or correct such work simply because it includes a religious symbol or addresses a religious theme.

C. Student Speech

Students have the right to speak about religious topics, just as they do with regard to political topics. This right will be terminated if it turns into religious harassment aimed at an individual or a group of people.

D. Student Dress

Please see the Policy on "Freedom of Expression" in the Student section.

II. RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

Religious symbols may only be displayed by employees as part of an approved instructional sequence. The display should serve primarily as a teaching aid or resource and be limited to a period, not to exceed three school days.

III. EXCUSALS FOR RELIGIOUS REASONS

Students will be excused from lessons or activities which they and their parents find objectionable for religious reasons. Alternative assignments will be substituted.

IV. RELEASE TIME

Students will be dismissed to off premises for religious instruction with the approval of the parent or guardian. Religious instruction by outsiders on school premises during the school day is not permitted.

V. STUDENT ABSENCES ON RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS

Student absences to observe religious holidays are "excused." Students will complete assignments or examinations missed as a result of those absences.

VI. SCHOOL CALENDAR

The school calendar will be prepared to minimize conflict with major religious holidays of the school district's constituencies. When conflicts cannot be avoided, teachers will exercise sensitivity and care in scheduling tests, special projects, field trips, introduction of new concepts, or activities that would be difficult to make up.

Students will make up missed assignments without loss of status or penalty.

VII. TEACHING ABOUT RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS

Abington School District recognizes the importance of religion in history and its role in shaping contemporary society. The District will teach about religion and religious holidays through its prescribed courses of study. It is important to distinguish the difference between teaching about religion and religious indoctrination. The District's approach to religion in its schools is purely academic. The District may educate its students about all religions but may not promote or denigrate any religion. It is the District's goal to strive for student awareness

of religions but never to press for student acceptance of any religion, viewpoint, or belief. The District promotes solely the study of religion, never the practice of religion.

As such, teachers, administrators, and classroom aides shall maintain a climate of “neutrality” at all times within the classroom and shall be sensitive to recognize differing religions represented by the students of this District. Students may not use a religion class as a forum to proselytize others.

The use of religious symbols is permissible if they are used as symbols of religious heritage or a teaching resource. These symbols may be displayed as part of an approved instructional sequence. The display should serve primarily as a teaching aid or resource and be limited to a period not to exceed three (3) school days. Symbols of religious holidays that have acquired secular meaning are also permissible as decorations. (For example, Christmas trees, stars, snowflakes, shamrocks, bunnies, cupids, and dreidels.) Teachers and school administrators are encouraged to exercise good judgment in selecting such displays so as not to offend the sensibilities of those of different religious beliefs.

VIII. MOMENTS OF SILENCE

If a school is recognizing a “moment of silence” during the school day, students may pray silently on an individual basis or choose not to pray during this period of time. Students are not permitted to pray out loud or within a group during a “moment of silence” during the school day.

IX. EQUAL ACCESS ACT OF 1984

The Equal Access Act is designed to ensure that, consistent with the First Amendment, student religious activities are accorded the same access to public school facilities as are student secular activities. A meeting, as defined and protected by the Equal Access Act, may include a prayer service, Bible reading, or other worship exercise. (See Board Policy Statement regarding “Student Access to School Facilities” in the Buildings and Grounds section.

X. RELIGIOUS MUSIC

The study of religious music as part of music appreciation courses, as a musical experience, and as part of a study of various cultures is encouraged. School concerts that present a variety of selections may include religious music or seasonal music, not religious in nature, such as “Dreidel Dreidel,” “Frosty the Snowman,” “Jingle Bells,” or “Winter Wonderland.” The study of music with religious themes is permissible if it serves a sound educational goal and is not used as a vehicle for promoting religious belief.

Music educators and teachers must exercise good judgment in selecting sacred music for programming public performances. As suggested by the Music Educators’ National Conference publication entitled, “Religious Music in the Schools,” the following questions should be asked in determining the appropriateness of religious music during the planning phase of a concert:

1. Is the music selected on the basis of its musical and educational value rather than its religious context?

2. Are the traditions of different people shared and respected?
3. Is the excessive use of sacred music, religious symbols or scenery, and performance in devotional settings avoided?
4. Is the role of sacred music one of neutrality, neither promoting nor inhibiting religious views?
5. Are all local and school policies regarding religious holidays and the use of sacred music observed?

XI. RECOGNITION OF RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS

Schools will recognize and study about religious holidays. Use of religious symbols is permissible if they are used as examples of religious heritage or a teaching resource. Religious symbols may be displayed for no more than three (3) consecutive school days as part of the academic program. Symbols of religious holidays that have acquired secular meaning such as Christmas trees, stars, snowflakes, bunnies, cupids, dreidels, and shamrocks are permissible as decorations. In the use of such decorations, school administrators and teachers will “. . . exercise good judgment and a sense of fair play so as not to offend the sensibilities of those of differing creeds and religious beliefs.”