

INSTRUCTION**Teaching ABOUT Religions, Customs and Traditions**

The Okemos Public Schools function within constitutional provisions stipulated at both the federal and state levels. At the federal level, the First Amendment of the Constitution states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." In the Michigan Constitution, the Declaration of Rights (Article I, Section 4) states in part: "The civil and political rights, privileges and capacities of no person shall be diminished or enlarged on account of his religious belief."

No school activity shall suggest preference for or antagonism against any religious belief or non-belief with regard to religion. Recognizing that religion and spiritual belief play an important role in history, culture and character development, the board of education recognizes the importance of study about religions and spiritual beliefs as part of the curriculum. Various beliefs and customs shall be fairly and sensitively represented.

Sensitivity to the feelings of children and to the diversity of religious backgrounds of students necessitates care in the design of instructional programs and attention to appropriate staff development. Any study of religions, of the impact of religions upon society, of religious art, music, drama and literature, must be to achieve educational purposes. Such study should neither advance nor inhibit religion.

Sensitivity to the religious observances of students necessitates care in scheduling school events and major instructional activities.

POLICY

Adopted: 11-21-88

Amended: 12-05-05

Reviewed: 08-27-07

Teaching About Religions, Customs and Traditions-Regulation

Principles for Decision-Making

Educational practices within the policy entail a degree of professional judgment. A major guide for such judgments is the application of the so-called three part test established by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Lemon v Kurtzman*, 403 US 602, where each condition must be met:

1. Is the PURPOSE secular?
2. Is the EFFECT one that neither advances nor inhibits religion?
3. Are there NO EXCESSIVE ENTANGLEMENTS between the schools and religious organizations?

Teaching about religion shall serve educational purposes and be consistent with the goals of the Okemos schools, including to: “increase instructional learning experiences that are relevant to the real world” and the Okemos schools belief that: “recognizing and embracing the uniqueness of every student inspires each one to reach his or her fullest potential.” [Okemos Public Schools 2006-2010 Strategic Plan.]

Any use of religious music, drama, literature, and the arts to achieve educational goals and course objectives, as well as religious themes in such areas as the social studies, shall be consistent with the regulations stated above. Resource persons, whether parents, other community members, religious leaders or other persons shall contribute their understandings within the framework of this policy and under the guidance of teachers or other appropriate school personnel.

Activities around holidays that may have a religious and/or secular basis are acceptable when they have been determined appropriate by the teacher and/or the building principal. Every effort will be made to select activities that will include all students. However, the school will respect a parent's request for their child to not participate in the activities. School programs or activities (within and beyond the school day), such as assemblies, should be presented in a prudent and objective manner and sensitive to the age and beliefs of student participants and audiences. Therefore, the emphasis on what unites rather than what divides will be an important factor in determining the propriety of any particular activity.

A program may include traditional music and symbols appropriate for a given holiday season. Further, holiday symbols that have been determined secular by the courts and not in violation of the Establishment Clause may be displayed temporarily. The use of religious symbols that are a part of a religious holiday is permitted as a teaching aid or resource provided such symbols are displayed as an example of the cultural and religious heritage of the holiday and are temporary in nature.

"Teaching About Religion" in the Public School

The following statements distinguish between teaching about religion in public schools and religious indoctrination:

- The school's approach to religion is academic, not devotional;
- The school may strive for student awareness of religions, but should not press for student acceptance of any one religion;
- The school may sponsor study about religion, but may not sponsor the practice of religion;
- The school may expose students to a diversity of religious views, but may not impose any particular view;
- The school may educate about all religions, but may not promote or denigrate any religion;
- The school may inform the student about various beliefs, but should not seek to conform him or her to any particular belief.

Religious holidays should be treated CAREFULLY in the classroom

Religious holidays offer excellent opportunities to teach about religions in the elementary and secondary classroom. Recognition of and information about such holidays should focus on the origin, history, and generally agreed-upon meaning of the observances. If the approach is objective, neither advancing nor inhibiting religion, it can foster among students understanding, mutual respect and tolerance within and beyond the local community.

Responsibility for Decision-Making

The teacher shall discuss activities that involve religious content with the building principal. Early review and decision by the principal is important. When holiday activities involve the entire school system, the superintendent or designee shall be consulted.

Notification to Parents

Through the school newsletters, the principal will notify parents of various activities planned during the school year that may have religious holiday content. Additional notification to parents may be made about specific assemblies that may have religious holiday content. Parents will be encouraged to inform teachers or the principal of any concerns they may have regarding these activities.

"Santa" is not considered a religious figure by this policy; however, in view of the fact that some individuals within this community are offended by his presence within the schools, parents should be notified prior to Santa's visit.

Access to Appeal Process

1. The decision made at the building level may be appealed to the building principal for review. The building principal will discuss concerns with the classroom teacher and make a decision about the appropriateness of the activity.
2. The principal's decision may be appealed through a written request to the superintendent or designee. The superintendent or designee shall respond within three school days after the written request is received.
3. The superintendent or designee decision may be appealed to the board of education. The board, at the next meeting, shall schedule a time to hear the appeal. It must do so within ten school days from the day they decided to hear the appeal.

Regulations: August 27, 2007

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS (RE: "Teaching About Religion..." Policy)

1. If a child draws a holiday symbol, such as reindeer, wreath, "Santa" or a Christmas tree, will the teacher be able to put it on the wall? *The guidelines specifically state that holiday symbols such as Santa or Christmas trees may be put on the wall on a temporary basis.*
2. If a child draws a religious symbol such as the cross, Star of David, manger scene, crescent, creche, or menorah, will the teacher be able to put it on the wall? *The guidelines specifically state that religious symbols such as these may be put on the wall on a temporary basis.*
3. Is there an appeal process? *Yes, the appeal process could involve the building principal, teacher, superintendent or designee, and the board of education.*
4. Are you telling teachers what to say and how to say it? *No; however, teachers should check with administrators concerning the appropriateness of the planned activities and how the activities are communicated.*
5. Won't this policy affect every party or holiday throughout the school year? *In view of the fact that most holidays, including Christmas, Easter, Passover, Hanukkah, Rosh Hashanah, Ramadan, St. Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day, Thanksgiving and Halloween, are examples of cultural and religious heritage, the parties can be educational and acceptable. Every effort will be made to select activities that will include all students. However, the school will respect a parent's request for their child to not participate in the activities.*
6. Does this policy exclude discussion of holidays? *No, it permits the discussion of a variety of religions, customs and traditions.*
7. How does this policy affect our children? *The policy and regulations provide guidelines that neither advance nor inhibit religion while at the same time allow students the opportunity to learn about a variety of religions, customs and traditions.*
8. Will there be standards to judge whether a program is religious or not? *Yes, it is known as the three-part test established by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Lemon v Kurtzman*, 403 US 602, as it is evolving through judicial interpretation.*
9. How will everyone interpret the policy? *The regulations more clearly interpret the policy than in the past. Faculty members will become familiar with the policy and regulations through faculty meetings.*
10. Can Santa Claus come to school? *Yes, Santa may come to school within the context of this policy. Although, in our opinion, Santa in the popular sense is secular, it is the board's policy in recognizing the sensitive feelings of some students and their families that Santa's presence in the cafeteria during lunchtime is inappropriate. Other arrangements for Santa's visit may be made, taking into account the feelings of the entire community.*