CULTURAL DIVERSITY - RELIGION IN THE SCHOOLS (Policy)

The Board of Education acknowledges the importance of religion to the understanding of society and the richness of the human experience. In approaching the teaching about religion in the school, the district will be guided by three concepts when making decisions about the appropriateness of activities for inclusion in the school program: the activity should have a secular purpose; the activity should neither advance nor inhibit religion; and the activity must not foster an excessive entanglement of "government" with religion.

Fostering the development of knowledge and respect for the rights of all cultural and religious groups is a continuing goal of the Williamsville Central School District.

Opportunities to learn about cultural and religious traditions should be provided within the framework of the curriculum. Information about religious and cultural holidays and traditions focusing on how and when they are celebrated, their origins and histories should be part of this instruction. This educational opportunity should be handled with great care, sensitivity and respect for the feelings and beliefs of individuals.

An environment should be created and encouraged where students of various ethnic backgrounds feel comfortable in sharing comments about their religious and cultural traditions. No student should be singled out to share or participate in such discussions solely on the basis of the student's identification with the cultural/religious heritage being addressed. A student's preference not to share or participate in such discussions should be honored and respected without penalty.

a. School Activities Related to Religious Holidays or Themes

1. School activities related to the teaching about religious holidays or themes must be consistent with, representative of, and congruent with the district's curriculum.

2. In planning school activities related to the teaching about religious holidays or themes, special effort must be made to ensure that the activity is not devotional and that students of all faiths can join without feeling they are betraying their own beliefs.

3. In planning school activities related to the teaching about religious holidays or themes, age appropriate activities are encouraged within the framework of the curriculum. Teaching about religious and cultural holidays may include such special activities as parties and special foods, if they reinforce educational goals.

b. Symbols in the Schools
The purpose of using religious symbols should be to teach about religious concepts and traditions, and to convey historical or cultural content, not to promote or celebrate religious concepts, events, or holidays.

1. Classroom use on a temporary basis and/or display of religious symbols is permitted as a teaching resource or aid only within the framework of the curriculum. Such use and/or display should provide an environment whereby students of all faiths can participate without betraying their own beliefs.

2. Even when it may be compatible with the instructional setting, a display outside the classroom whose themes focus on the religious holiday(s), tradition(s), or symbol(s) of any religion is not appropriate.

3. Individual student-initiated expressions in response to any given project may take the form of religious writing, musical composition or artwork. These creations will be guided by the teacher and may be displayed in the school in the same manner as other student created expressions. They are to be evaluated in the same manner as any other student product.

4. Individual expression of religious belief by means of wearing of religious symbols on the person or on clothing is a protected expression of faith.

c. Music in the Schools

The purpose of using religious music should be to teach musical concepts, to convey historical and cultural content, or to create aesthetic experiences in a setting which emphasizes artistic expression and educational value, not celebration of faith.

1. Religious music should be appropriate for performance any time during the school year.

2. Musical programs prepared for or presented by student groups as an outcome of the instructional program should not be religious or religious holiday oriented. However seasonable programs may include religious music. On those occasions when religious music is included in a seasonable program the music should not dominate the program and should be balanced and inclusive.

3. Parents/guardians and students should be informed that requests for the student to not participate in singing or playing religious music will be respected. Such requests should be made by the parents/guardians as early as possible in the school year so that students may fulfill course requirements in another way without penalty.

d. District Calendar

The days on which members of a religious group may be absent to observe a religious holiday (legal absence) will be noted on the school planning calendar and the district calendar distributed to parents. Out of respect for a student's observance of
these holidays, teachers will be sensitive to the needs of the student by allowing them to make up all new work, homework, and tests without penalty. Parents/guardians are encouraged to notify the school prior to the absence in order to assist the staff in instructional planning and in meeting the needs of the student.

1. To the extent possible, school events will not be scheduled on religious holidays, including evenings of observance.
2. In scheduling graduations the school administration will be sensitive to the religious observations and restrictions of all students.

**Ref:** U.S. Constitution, First Amendment
Education Law §3210

*Prior policy, 8220, Adoption date: March 2, 1999*
CULTURAL DIVERSITY PROCEDURE – RELIGION IN THE SCHOOLS

In order to implement Policy 4313, this procedure has been developed to provide guidance to members of the staff. Guidance beyond the statements in this procedure may be found in four basic principles which would apply to the topic of teaching about religion in schools: (1) Is it constitutionally permissible (2) Is it educationally sound (3) Is it culturally sensitive and (4) Is it age appropriate?

School Activities Related to Religious Holidays or Themes

1. Acknowledgment of, explanation of, and teaching about a variety of celebrated holidays which are culturally diverse are encouraged. Small scale parties and decorations are permitted if they are clearly connected to educational goals.
2. Attention will be given to the seasonal holidays from various cultures and religions as they occur during the school year and are appropriate to the curriculum.
3. Classroom activities and displays of decorations and holiday symbols for any one holiday will not exceed ten (10) school days.
4. Field trips conducted during the school day for the purpose of attending a holiday/celebration related event must be an extension and/or reinforcement of the adopted curricular program of the grade or subject.
5. Planned classroom activities involving the making of gifts by students for parents, charitable organizations, senior citizens groups, etc., which have a holiday/celebration theme must be an optional activity for students. Alternative activities within the classroom shall be provided which are consistent with curricular goals and the maturity level of the students involved.
6. A gift exchange among students in a classroom which is connected to any singular holiday is not to be organized.
7. Voluntary initiatives to provide gifts and/or services to charitable organizations may be appropriate to the educational goals of a particular classroom. Care must be taken so that undue influence and pressure is not applied to students so that the voluntary nature of the project or activity is maintained.
8. The designing or construction of holiday displays by students must be voluntary.
9. The recognition of holidays such as Valentine’s Day, Halloween, St. Patrick’s Day and Thanksgiving should be in such a manner as to be sensitive to the perspectives of all students.

Symbols in the Schools

1. Careful attention must be given to the use of symbols which may be associated with religious holidays. For example, the required coloring or cutting out of angels at the time Christmas is celebrated would be an
inappropriate activity. Other examples would include: Christmas wreaths, Easter eggs, Halloween witches.

2. The use of religious symbols and religious holiday symbols, provided they are used only as examples of cultural and religious heritage in conjunction with teaching about religions, is permissible as a teaching aid or resource. Religious symbols may be displayed only on a temporary basis as part of the academic program.

Religious symbols are sacred to particular faiths and belong primarily in a place of worship or home. Historically, religious symbols have been an integral part of society and cultures, and use in the school must be for temporary periods of time and only when appropriate for educational purposes. (Religious symbols include, for example, Star of David, Creche, Cross, and Buddha.)

Religious holiday symbols must be used primarily for educational purposes and secondarily for decorative purposes. Their meaning should be explained to students. Religious holiday symbols are sometimes cultural symbols that may have no religious significance themselves but have been allowed to become associated with a particular religious belief in connection with holiday celebrations. (Holiday symbols include, for example, Santa Claus, Menorah, Shofar, Easter eggs, Christmas trees and wreaths.)

Music in the Schools

1. Music will be chosen for its musical merit. A good piece of music should not be excluded because of its religious or cultural origin.

2. Religious and cultural music should be treated with respect with regard to its content as a means of fostering mutual respect among students of differing religious and cultural backgrounds.

3. As part of the adopted music program, songs associated with specific holidays or celebrations may be utilized. Care must be taken so that use of these materials does not consume a majority of the available instructional time during any holiday season.

4. Student performances conducted during the school year must be clearly related to the curricular program of the student group which is performing. Performances should not focus upon any single holiday or celebration, but rather should be reflective of the curricular material studied by the students.

5. Members of the staff implementing the policy of the district are directed to review music selections which may be associated with religion with the Instructional Specialist for Performing Arts and the building principals.

District Calendar

1. The Multifaith Calendar, published by the Canadian Ecumenical Action will be the primary resource for information about religious holidays. Local community members will be contacted for additional information
as necessary. These resource people will be asked to identify cultural and religious holidays on which students of the particular culture or religion are usually absent from school.

**Other Matters**

1. Absences for religious observance shall be treated in accordance with Regulations of the Commissioner of Education and directives from the State Education Department. It is understood that those days of religious observance which are part of the required school calendar will be conducted as normal instructional days including the introduction of new material, administration of tests and examinations, and other normal instructional activities.

2. As a matter of good judgment, the selection of materials to be taught on days of a significant amount of student absence should take into consideration the impact on subsequent classroom instruction.

3. Make-up tests, summaries of new instructional material and other considerations must be given to those students who may not be able to complete homework assignments because of absence or inadequate time due to religious observance.

4. Teachers and administrators must extend the deadline for any homework projects or instructional activities when a student observes a religious holiday, whether it be a day when school is in session or a day when school is closed. On some religious holidays students are prohibited from doing homework and other activities and will require extended time to complete their projects, homework, or instructional activities.

5. Holidays of a patriotic nature shall be observed to be consistent with the ideals of our American heritage. The observance of all other holidays shall be in good taste and shall not be intended for indoctrination.

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