

TEACHING ABOUT RELIGION

Although the federal and state constitutions forbid the teaching of religion in the public school, they do not preclude teaching about religion. In fact, schools have an obligation to teach about religion and its role in our civilization.

The Board of Education endorses the following finding of the Commissioner of Education:

"If the schools are to carry out their responsibility for the transmission of knowledge, and if they are to prepare young people for the future by giving them an understanding of the past and the present, they must inevitably teach about religion and its place in civilization. Religion has been a powerful and determining force in the shaping of every aspect of human development and civilization. By bringing to young people an understanding of what a vital force religion has been, is and will continue to be, our schools can create a vital interest in and foster an enduring respect for religion...In our country we have a precious heritage of religious freedom which is the basis for our doctrine of the separation of church and state. It is the duty of the schools to make sure that every boy and girl acquires a thorough knowledge and understanding of the First Amendment, as reinforced by the Fourteenth Amendment, and the reason for their adoption. It is important that our young people understand that belief in the separation of church and state, both in the past and today, stems not from a desire to exclude religion from our national life but from a desire to ensure the full and free development of religion consistent with our basic belief in the rights and freedom of the individual."

The Board further believes that study about religion, when properly done, is both constitutionally permissible and educationally sound. Religious holidays offer excellent opportunities to teach about religion. Principals and teachers may develop holiday programs which focus on the origin, history, and generally agreed-upon meaning of the observance in an objective manner which fosters among students understanding and mutual respect.

Under a three-part test established by the Supreme Court in *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, such activities would be permissible when they:

1. have a secular purpose,
2. have a principal or primary effect which does not advance nor inhibit religion, and
3. do not foster excessive entanglement with religion.

Students shall be given the option to be excused from participating in those parts of a program or curriculum involving a religious theme which conflicts with their own religious beliefs.

In planning activities related to a religious holiday or theme, special effort should be made to ensure that the activity is not devotional and students of all faiths can join without feeling that they are betraying their own beliefs. Therefore,

1. school plays shall not be overly religious nor portray church-like scenes,
2. religious music shall not entirely dominate the program selections, and
3. programs notes and illustrations shall not be religious or sectarian.

The display of religious objects or symbols is also prohibited except to the extent that they are used as a teaching aid or resource to provide examples of cultural and religious heritage within the context of a short-term study in the curriculum such as world religions, art or history.

The Board directs the Superintendent of Schools to ensure that the guidance of the Commissioner and the courts concerning teaching about religion is observed in the Niskayuna Schools.

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

Adopted: February 26, 1996