

RECOGNITION OF RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS, BELIEFS, AND CUSTOMS

INTRODUCTION

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) is committed to promoting respect and appreciation for the religions, beliefs, and customs of its diverse student population. It is the responsibility of each administrator to demonstrate and foster an appreciation of this cultural diversity throughout school experiences.

The principle that public schools shall be religiously neutral has been established and accepted in a long line of decisions. The Supreme Court has defined "religiously neutral" as refraining from:

- promotion of any and all religions
- expressions of opposition or hostility to religion
- showing preference for one religion over another

Teaching about religion as a means to cultural understanding is appropriate, but it should be accomplished through classroom programs that are consistent with the Constitution and the goals of public education. Private religious expression by students is permissible, as long as the expression is not disruptive.

As in all cases, the unique facts of each situation should be considered when implementing these principles and the MCPS guidelines outlined below.

GUIDELINES

The task of designing educational programs in a pluralistic society has become more challenging. The following guidelines seek to assist staff members in this task.

General

1. All schools should develop a climate in which each child can learn and appreciate cultures and heritages different from his/her own.
2. The school curriculum includes a recognition of the role of religions in literature, history, the humanities, and the arts. Further, the schools should build an understanding of the relationship between government and religious freedom as a preparation for full citizenship in a multifaith society.
3. Schools should deal directly and objectively with religion, when and where it is intrinsic to the learning experience. Instructional methods should seek to clarify the interrelationship of religion with other elements of human culture.
4. Principals and staff members should handle religion in learning situations with fairness and objectivity, respecting that students' differing beliefs are admirable and essential elements in a pluralistic society.

5. It is necessary for staff members to examine their planning practices, implementation of activities, communications, and scheduling to avoid insensitivity toward others who are perceived as different.
6. Religious holidays offer educational opportunities for recognizing and understanding the many different religious, philosophical, and cultural beliefs/practices included in the broader society. Instructional units should reflect the diversity of the community.
7. When planning a program or activity, it is advisable to first consult with existing committees or groups such as the PTA or human relations committees to avoid misunderstandings and controversy. It also is necessary to assure that such committees or groups reflect the diversity of the community. Consultation, planning, and notification of all involved parties should take place in a timely manner to avoid misunderstandings and disruptions of schedules and personal family calendars.
8. Periodic review of the MCPS Comprehensive Calendar will provide staff members who are planning programs or events (eg., sports events, plays, etc.) with an indication of observances that may require special consideration as far as scheduling is concerned. In addition, the MCPS Comprehensive Calendar includes observances for which some students may request early dismissal, accommodation for fasting or other dietary regimens, or permission to complete exams early. Individual exceptions or makeups may be arranged.

Teaching About Religion or Religious Holidays

1. Teaching about the role that religion has played in history or in the development of society is desirable in a multiethnic society. The historical origin of religious holidays may be explained in an unbiased and objective manner without sectarian indoctrination. When staff needs specific expert information, they should request assistance from the Division of Family and Community Partnerships or another appropriate source rather than a student or parent.
2. The use of religious symbols in the classroom as an example of a cultural and religious heritage is permitted as a teaching aid as long as it is temporary in nature and accompanied by appropriate classroom instruction as to its significance within the culture.

Religion in the Curriculum

1. Schools may include religious literature, music, drama, and art in the curriculum and in activities, provided they are only part of the overall learning experience in the various fields of study and are presented objectively.
2. The discussion of religious themes in the arts and history should be balanced for a comprehensive study of these areas. Such studies should never foster any particular religious tenets nor demean any religious beliefs.
3. Student-initiated expressions that are responsive to questions or assignments in the classroom but also reflect their religious beliefs should not be prohibited. Further, students are free to express religious belief or nonbelief in compositions, art, music, speech, debate, and theater pieces so long as it is appropriate and responsive to the assignment.

4. The study of religious music as a part of music education and a part of a study of various lands and cultures is appropriate though it should not be the predominant focus of instruction.

Suggestions For In-School Programs

1. Appropriate titles for concerts presented during holiday seasons include Holiday, Winter, December, Spring, etc. It is appropriate to schedule programs prior to vacation periods since the student interest tends to peak at this time following months of rehearsal.
2. A musical program prepared and presented during school hours should not be, nor have the effect of being, religiously oriented or a religious celebration.
3. While individual religious pieces of music may be performed for their musical value, the total effect of the program or concert should be nonreligious.
4. The music performed for holiday concerts should reflect a balance between sacred and secular, popular and classic. Since a program is presented for entertainment as well as for musical learning, it should have diversity to make it interesting. Thus, there should be a balance between heavy and light textures, between large and small ensembles, and between accompanied and unaccompanied selections. Performers and audience alike appreciate a program featuring easy and difficult pieces, music sung in a variety of languages, and selections representing a variety of cultures and historical periods.
5. During the initial stages in planning, a draft of holiday programs, including activities and musical selections, should be submitted by appropriate staff to the principal for approval. When necessary, the principal may turn to the music coordinator or the Office of School Performance.
6. Written information about program selection in the form of program notes is highly appropriate. These notes might include historical data, musical analysis, and a discussion of instructional outcomes.
7. Even though the teacher provides instructional objectives for the various selections in a concert, there may be some students who feel that performing these works constitutes an act inappropriate to their beliefs. Provisions for handling such concerns should be made by the music teacher in consultation with the students and their parents. In handling such arrangements, care should be taken to avoid embarrassment to, or coercion of, the students.
8. Sacred music (melody associated with a particular religious ceremony, such as a Mass) may be included in a school performance. Where sacred music is included in a program, the total effect of the program should be nonreligious.

Out-of-School Concerts

1. The same criteria should govern the selection of music for out-of-school programs as for in-school performances. The music should reflect a diversity of styles, cultures, and historical eras. It should be chosen for musical value and its potential to achieve outcomes presented in the Program of Studies.

2. Performance should not be part of a worship service. For example, if a concert is held at a local house of worship prior to a service, it should not be necessary for students to remain in the house of worship and attend the service following the program.
3. Teachers should be sensitive to the fact that some students may feel uncomfortable performing with a school choir in a house of worship. If this feeling is known, provisions should be made in advance for suitable alternative educational activities and participation should be optional.
4. When planning out-of-school concerts, it is essential that students be given the objectives for the performance. If a printed program is available, it is appropriate to include these objectives for the benefit of the audience.
5. Parental permission should be secured before students participate in such out-of-school concerts.

Religious Literature

1. Students have a right to distribute religious literature to their schoolmates on the same terms as they are permitted to distribute other literature that is unrelated to school curriculum or activities. Schools may impose the same reasonable time, place, and manner or other constitutional restrictions on distribution of religious literature as they do on nonschool literature generally, but they may not single out religious literature for special regulation.
2. Distribution of literature, announcements, posters, etc., by individuals not directly connected with MCPS including students not currently enrolled in an MCPS school, only shall be permitted in accordance with MCPS Policy CNA, *Informational Materials and Announcements*.
3. Materials on religions for media centers, other resource facilities, and classrooms should be evaluated and selected according to criteria and procedures employed for all materials.