

RELIGION IN THE SCHOOLS

In accordance with the mandate of the Constitution of the United States prohibiting the establishment of religion and protecting the free exercise thereof and freedom of speech it is the policy of this Board that the Albemarle County Public Schools will, at all times and in all ways, be neutral in matters of religion. This means that the Albemarle County Public Schools:

- will assume no role or responsibility for the religious training of any student; and
- will in no way become involved in the religious belief, disbelief or doubt of any student.

This requirement of neutrality need not preclude nor hinder the Albemarle County Public Schools in fulfilling their responsibility to educate students to be tolerant and respectful of religious diversity. The School Division also recognizes that one of its educational responsibilities is to advance the students' knowledge and appreciation of the role that religion has played in the social, cultural, and historical development of civilization.

Therefore, the School Division will approach religion from an objective, curriculum-related perspective, encouraging all students and staff members to be aware of the diversity of beliefs and respectful of each other's religious and/or non-religious views. In that spirit of respect, students and staff members should be excused from participating in activities that are contrary to their religious beliefs unless there are clear issues of compelling public interest that would prevent it.

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 Code of Virginia, 1950, as amended, §§ 22.1-78, 22.1-202.1

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In considering the role or the absence of the role of religion in the Albemarle County Public Schools, it is important to remember that the First Amendment of the United States Constitution does not forbid all mention of religion in public schools. It is the advancement or inhibition of religion that is prohibited. Nor are the public schools required to delete from curriculum all materials that may offend any religious sensitivity. For instance, studying music without sacred music, architecture minus cathedrals, or painting without scriptural themes would be incomplete from any point of view. There is nothing unconstitutional about the use of religious subjects or materials in public schools as long as they are presented as part of a religiously neutral program of education. Teaching against religion is as intolerable as teaching specific religious beliefs.

No religious belief or systems denying or objecting to belief should be promoted by the school division and none should be disparaged. It is essential that teaching about - and not of - religion be conducted in a factual, objective, and respectful manner. Because knowledge of religious institutions and beliefs is critical to understanding human experience, past and present, an education excluding consideration of religion would be inadequate. Study about religion should offer students the opportunity to become informed about the religions of our culture and of other cultures. Moreover, such study may include the impact and role of religions in the development of civilization.

It is both possible and desirable to educate students about the principle of religious liberty as one of the central elements of freedom and democracy in America and to acknowledge its unique place in our national and individual lives. The right and responsibility for teaching and presenting sectarian or religious beliefs is the province of the home and religious institutions. A variety of religious beliefs, as well as systems denying or objecting to belief, enriches the fabric of American culture. Albemarle County Public Schools should use every opportunity to foster understanding and mutual respect among students and parents, whether it involves race, culture, economic background, or religious beliefs. School personnel should avoid actions which operate to single out and isolate the "different" pupils and thereby serve to embarrass and harass children because of their personal views. Simply permitting a student to be excused from classroom activities involving religious content, ceremony, or celebration may not foster such understanding and respect, but may subject students to a cruel dilemma. Some children may avoid their right not to participate because of an understandable reluctance to be stigmatized as non-conformists on the basis of their request.

In order to ensure that Albemarle County Public Schools uphold constitutional standards within the religiously neutral role assigned the public schools, the following questions established by the United States Supreme Court should be asked of each school sponsored observance, program, instructional or other activity involving religious content, ceremony, or celebration:

1. What is the purpose of the activity? Is the purpose secular in nature?
2. What is the primary effect of the activity? Is it the celebration of religion? Does the activity either advance or inhibit religion?

3. Does the activity involve an excessive entanglement with a religion, religious group, or between the schools and a religious organization? Are funds of a religious origin being used for a school activity? Does either the school or religious activity require the consent or approval of the other?

If the purpose of the activity is not secular, if the effect of the activity is to advance or inhibit religion, or if the activity involves an excessive entanglement, then the activity is unconstitutional and will not be permitted in the Albemarle County Public Schools.

Definitions

1. Religious Organizations - Although it is difficult to give a conclusive definition of a religious organization, there are certain characteristic forms of human activity which are commonly recognized as religious. Therefore, any group subscribing to one or more of the following practices may be defined as religious:
 - a. Has as its primary purpose belief in gods or a God
 - b. Has a theological creed and form of worship
 - c. Accepts supernatural revelation
 - d. Seeks spiritual salvation
 - e. Has a prescribed set of theological rituals
 - f. Has been declared to be a religious organization by the Federal government or the Commonwealth of Virginia for tax purposes or by the courts
 - g. Has a legally recognized organization of ordained ministers ministering to congregations
 - h. Has regular services, meetings, or assemblies at which a particular set of spiritual beliefs is advanced
 - i. Claims to be religious or spiritual
 - j. Has an established system denying or objecting to religious belief.

2. School Hours - "School hours" includes the time from one-half hour before school until one-half hour after school.
3. Sponsorship - "Sponsorship" means endorsement and/or the advancement of money to support an activity.

Teaching About Religion

Since religious institutions and diverse beliefs have been a force in shaping human experience, past and present, awareness of these significant forces is part of a complete education. It is essential that the teaching about--not of--religion be conducted in a factual, objective and respectful manner.

Therefore, the practice of the Albemarle County Public Schools will be to:

- emphasize that religious themes in the arts, literature, and history, both in curriculum and school activities, be only as extensive as necessary for a balanced and comprehensive study of these areas. Studies should never foster any particular religious tenets or demean any religious or non-religious beliefs;
- provide a process for students to be excused from this instruction if their parents so desire. A student who is excused should be given reasonable alternative accommodations and materials to work on that are of educational benefit.
- provide an instructional atmosphere which would not require students to reveal their personal beliefs but which would allow them to express those beliefs of their own volition.

Since holiday recognition is an opportunity to expand learning opportunities about the diversity and variety of religious traditions, it will further be the practice of the Albemarle County Public Schools to:

- ensure that recognition of religious holidays be a valid educational experience.
- ensure that classroom discussions and other activities concerning religious holidays are accurate in content and objectively presented to foster understanding and respect and not to promote or inhibit the religion being studied.
- prepare the division's calendar so as to minimize conflicts with religious holidays of all faiths.

School Ceremonies and Observances

In order to provide guidance in the interpretation of the school division's policy on religion in the schools, the following statements are adopted and apply to school ceremonies and

observances:

1. Religious heritages and their histories, arts, symbols, and tenets may properly be included within a program of religiously neutral education. Such studies must be objective in nature and directly related to the broader educational purposes in the various fields of study.
2. At no time shall any form of religious belief or systems denying or objecting to belief be advanced or disparaged, nor shall any form of religious indoctrination or exercise, including prayers, be conducted by the school division or its employees. (A baccalaureate service is traditionally religious in nature and if it is to be held, must be sponsored by agencies separate from the school division.)
3. The historical and contemporary significance and the symbols and origins of religious holidays may be studied within the guidelines of this policy.
4. Music, art, literature, and drama related to religious holidays may be studied and performed in programs if they are presented in an objective and neutral manner as a tradition of the cultural heritage of the particular holiday. Such programs should be part of a curricular unit and should be simply staged and costumed.
5. In response to class questions and assignments, students are free to initiate expressions of religious belief or nonbelief through compositions, art forms, music, speech, and debate.
6. Student groups sponsored by the division shall not perform as part of a religious worship service.
7. In order to prevent misinterpretation of this policy, teachers who work with children to prepare school programs involving religious content, ceremony, or celebration (i.e., references to deities, sacred writing, music and art) should meet with their building principal before planning the program. The purpose of this meeting is to place such school programs in appropriate instructional context and to establish a mutual dialogue for selecting, planning, and designing these programs. In the event that the teacher and principal are unable to reach agreement, either party may refer the matter to the Superintendent.

Minute of Silence

During homeroom, first period or at another suitable time during each school day designated by the principal, one minute of silence shall be observed by all students present. The teacher or teachers in charge of each group of students shall be responsible for seeing that all students remain seated and silent and refrain from any distracting display that might interfere with the meditation, prayer or other silent activities of students.

The following guidelines shall be used by school officials in the effective implementation

of the policy of the School Board.

1. The purpose of the law and the policy supported by this regulation is to guarantee the right of every pupil to the free exercise of religion within the schools, and insure that the freedom of each individual pupil is subject to the least possible pressure from the State either to engage in or refrain from religious observation on school grounds. Another purpose of the policy is to create an atmosphere of understanding and respect for the different beliefs of others and for their right to hold these beliefs.

2. Before the observance during the first five days of implementation each year the teacher or principal shall read the statement below. In schools where facilities permit and the local school officials desire the explanation given during the first five days may be handled simultaneously throughout the school over the P.A. system.

"The State law and School Board policy provide that for one minute each day all students must be seated and silent so 'that each pupil may, in the exercise of his or her individual choice, meditate, or pray or engage in any other silent activity which does not interfere with, distract or impede other pupils in the like exercise of individual choice.' Officials believe that this observance will also create an atmosphere of understanding and respect for the different beliefs of others and their right to hold these beliefs."

Teachers who feel that the following explanation would be more effective for their classes may choose to use it instead of the one above.

"In our country we have religious freedom. We have a rule in our schools that each day we must sit and be quiet for one minute. During this time we can meditate, pray, think, read, write, draw or rest. We don't have to do anything as long as we are sitting and quiet. You should ask your parents to tell you more about why we have this time of quiet each day. They can help you decide what you should do during this each day."

In other words, what you may do during this activity is meditate, pray, think, read, write, draw, rest or any other silent activity that is suitable in a public school.

3. After the first five days of implementation the teacher, principal, or principal's designee shall announce each day that the observance is to follow and that everyone should be prepared to be seated and silent and shall make the following statement.

"We will now observe a minute of silence."

After one minute has passed, the teacher shall say:

"The minute of silence is over."

4. The role of school employees in this activity shall be limited to the supervision of students in accordance with the Virginia Code. The teacher shall avoid any action that could serve as a model for students in their observance of the minute of silence, either by attitude, physical position or verbal explanation.
5. After normal cautions and appeals by the teacher have failed students who willfully do not comply with this regulation shall be reported to the principal.

Student Absences and Excuses

Regular attendance is of prime importance in the educational process. All students are expected to attend school for all days of the established school calendar as approved annually by the Board of Education and in compliance with the Virginia School Attendance Law. When requested by the parent or guardian, students will be excused for observance of religious holidays.

If the religious belief and teachings of a student or his parents or legal guardian are contrary to the content of a school subject, or to any part of a school course or activity, the student shall be exempt from participation. To receive such an exemption, the parent or legal guardian must present a written request for exemption to the school principal stating the conflict involved.

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