



# LOS ANGELES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

## Policy Bulletin

**TITLE:** Guidelines for Teaching About Religions

**NUMBER:** BUL-5479.2

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School Operations

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**MAJOR CHANGES:** This Bulletin replaces Bul-5479.1 of the same subject, dated April 25, 2014. The content has been revised to add guidelines regarding prayer at culmination activities.

The following guidelines apply.

### **GUIDELINES:** I. PURPOSE

There has been increased recognition of growing religious diversity and its implications for the District and the Los Angeles area. In *Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools*, Charles C. Haynes (2001) observed "...America has expanded from the largely Protestant pluralism of the seventeenth century to a nation of some 3,000 religious groups. It is more vital than ever that every citizen understand the appropriate role of religion in public life and affirm the constitutional guarantees of religious liberty, or freedom of conscience, for people of all faiths or none" (p. 17). It is in this context of growing religious diversity that this bulletin is presented, to clarify the appropriate relationship between schools and religions. The bulletin clarifies the roles and responsibilities of schools with regard to teaching about religions.

### **II. BACKGROUND**

The appropriateness of teaching about religions is made necessary by the pervasive message of separation of church and state and a mistaken interpretation that schools are not to recognize religions in any way. Schools have a responsibility to teach about religions as a way to understand the cultural and historical influences that shape a society. This issue has been addressed by the Supreme Court which acknowledged that a person's education may not be complete "without a study of comparative religion of the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization." State law and education policy also support teaching about religion.

### **ROUTING:**

Local District Superintendents  
Administrators of Instruction  
Administrators of Operations  
Instructional Directors Operations  
Coordinators School Site  
Administrators School Site  
Employees



### III. CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

The *California History Social Science Framework* acknowledges the importance of teaching about religions, describing it as one of the distinguishing characteristics of an exemplary history social science program. An understanding of the world's major religions is in the Framework's cultural literacy strand for all grade levels. The role of religion in the development of civilization is a reoccurring theme in the study of world history. World History units that specifically include the teaching about religion are: *The Foundation of Western Ideas: The Ancient Hebrews and Greeks (Judaism)*; *West Meets East: The Early Civilizations of India and China (Hinduism and Buddhism)*; *East Meets West: Rome (Christianity) and the Growth of Islam*. There are also units of study within local, state and U.S. history where teaching about religions is appropriate.

In addition, music, art, literature, and drama with religious themes may be included in teaching about religions, provided that they are presented in a religiously neutral, prudent and objective manner, and are directly related to sound secular educational goals. Schools may wish to consult authorized textbooks for selections that are appropriate for school use.

### IV. SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

Increased accountability of site administrators and teachers for high academic achievement signals a need to scrutinize the time spent in preparing for school-wide programs—all such programs must have clear academic objectives. Programs should have clear, identifiable instructional themes that are understood by teachers, students, and parents. Elements of the program must be clearly identified as part of a secular (i.e., non-religious) program of education.

The scripts used in holiday programs with religious selections must communicate the educational purpose of the selected activities. The overall tone of the program should be secular and objective, and not focused on any one religion or religious observance. Such events must not promote or denigrate any particular religion, serve as a religious celebration, or become a forum for religious devotion. Students and staff who wish to be excused from participating in a *holiday program* must be accommodated without penalty or bias. Students and staff may not be excused from participating in *academic curriculum* that includes religion.

Acknowledgement of religious observances celebrated within the greater community can be used to teach about religion. The study of religious observances provides an excellent opportunity for students to learn about our pluralistic society. Schools may wish to examine religious observances as they relate to the instructional program. The following information on religious observances may be appropriately shared:



- What is the purpose of the observance?
- When is the observance held (date, location)?
- Who participates in the observance?
- What are some of the traditions associated with the observance?
- In what ways does this observance reveal the historical experiences and culture of its followers?
- Are there regional differences in the observance of this event?

While religious holidays may be acknowledged, as described above, they may not be “observed.” Religious symbols such as crosses, crèches of Christianity, the seven-candle menorah or a statue of Buddha, may be displayed in the classroom as examples of the cultural and religious heritage that is being studied in the curriculum. Religious icons may not be used merely as decorations. Their display must be temporary and tied directly to classroom instruction. School-sponsored activities should also focus on more than one religion/religious holiday. Diversity is important to teaching about religion and culture and helps ensure that schools remain neutral.

Some symbols, such as holiday wreaths, Christmas trees and Chanukah menorahs have both secular and religious meanings. If schools choose to use holiday decorations, they should include religious and secular symbols of more than one faith to ensure there is no misperception of religious promotion.

## V. PROTECTED PRAYER IN PUBLIC SETTINGS

Students may pray when not engaged in school activities or instruction, subject to the same rules designed to prevent material disruption of the educational program. Students may organize prayer groups, religious clubs, and "see you at the pole" gatherings before school to the same extent that students are permitted to organize other non-curricular student activities or groups.

Students may choose to express their beliefs about religion in homework, artwork, and other school assignments. Submissions should be judged by academic or artistic standards and neither penalized nor rewarded for their religious content. Student speakers at student assemblies and extracurricular activities, such as sporting events or talent shows, may not be selected on a basis that either favors or disfavors religious speech. If student speakers are selected based on neutral, objective criteria and retain primary control over the content of their expression, their expression is not attributable to the school and therefore may not be restricted because of its religious/anti-religious content.

If school officials determine or substantially control the content of what is expressed,



such speech is attributable to the school and may not include prayer or other religious/anti-religious content. To avoid any mistaken perception that a school endorses student speech, the school may make disclaimers to clarify that the speech, regardless of topic or content, is the speaker's and not the school's (U.S. Department of Education's *Guidance on Constitutionally Protected Prayer in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools*).

## VI. CULMINATION ACTIVITIES

Graduation and culmination ceremonies are recognized as school-sponsored events, even if they are held at an off-site location or outside of school hours. As such, there is a prohibition against the inclusion of prayers at the culmination ceremony, regardless of whether they are led by staff, students, clergy, or other invited guests. The school must make a reasonable effort to preview student and guest speakers' messages in advance of the event and control their subject matter, content or purpose.

## VI. ROLE OF ADMINISTRATORS AND TEACHERS

The First Amendment of the Constitution in calling for the separation of church and state is referring to the prohibition against the promotion of religion by the government. This prohibition defines specific administrator and teacher responsibilities—school personnel are not to promote any one religion.

When acting in their official capacities, school administrators, teachers and other school employees are prohibited by the Establishment Clause from encouraging or discouraging prayer, and from actively participating in such activity with students. Employees may participate in religious activities such as a prayer group or Bible study during non-duty times, such as before or after school, or during lunch.

In the context of instruction, school personnel can help students develop a basic understanding and appreciation of the role of religion in cultures. Also, teachers may encourage students to become aware of their richly diverse and complex religious traditions and to examine new forms of religious expression and insight.

Teaching about religion requires thoughtful preparation and planning. Working with a school-wide committee representative of a cross-section of faiths may avoid misunderstanding and feelings of exclusion or content imbalance. Speakers may provide comprehensive presentation of the religious traditions under study. Faculty from local colleges and universities should be considered.

Invited speakers should understand the guidelines for teaching about religion in public education, and should be clear that their presentations must be an objective and scholarly discussion of the historical period and the religion being considered.



Re-creating religious practices or ceremonies through role-playing activities should not take place in a public school classroom. It is recommended that educationally published audio-visual resources and primary source documents be used to introduce students to the ceremonies and rituals of the world's religions. Religious ceremonies are sacred to those who practice them. Recreations may unwittingly mock or, at the very least, oversimplify the religious meaning or intent of the ritual.

## VII. PARENTAL AND STUDENT RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Schools have a responsibility to teach about religion within the curricular guidelines provided by the California State Content Standards, the Common Core Standards and District courses of study. Curriculum should not be altered to meet the demands of one parent or group.

Students cannot be compelled to participate in non-curricular activities that conflict with their religious beliefs, such as singing religious-themed songs or reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. However, there is no expectation that students will be shielded from exposure to ideas that conflict with their religious beliefs. Inevitably, students will read literature, learn about concepts, and interact with peers of differing belief systems.

## VIII. HUMAN RELATIONS DYNAMICS OF RELIGIOUS ISSUES IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

The responsibility to teach about religion is clear. However, teachers and administrators must appreciate the multiple facets of religion that have human relations consequences. Misunderstandings may arise from classroom instruction about religion or issues of beliefs among staff, students, and parents. Such instances should be taken seriously. Listen with openness and objectivity to the concerns being voiced. Clarify the issue and seek resolution in accordance with these guidelines. Seek to resolve misunderstanding or conflict. Mediate if necessary.

**AUTHORITY:** California Constitution, Article IX, Section 8  
California Education Code sections 37220-37223, 48014, 48930, 51510-51513  
California Government Code sections 6700-6720  
Memorandum, *Calendar of Commemorative Dates and Observances*, issued annually by the Office of Educational Services  
*Educating for Diversity*, Los Angeles School Board Resolution, passed March 16, 1992.  
[https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/religionandschools/prayer\\_guidance](https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/religionandschools/prayer_guidance)  
[www.adl.org](http://www.adl.org)



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BUL-6204.1, Holiday Displays and Programs, dated December 7, 2015, issued by  
Office of Educational Services

BUL-5298.1, Guidelines For Halloween Activities, dated October 26, 2015, issued by  
Office of Educational Services

**ASSISTANCE:** For assistance or further information, please contact School Operations, Office of Human Relations, Diversity and Equity at (213) 241-5337.

**RESOURCES:** California History-Social Science Standards and Framework