

Bylaws of the Board

Commitment to Democratic Principles in Relation to Community, Staff, Students

Conflicts in Public Education

As an educational community we strive to work together. We recognize that, at times, there may be differences of opinion. Therefore, we establish the following principles as ground rules:

I. RELIGIOUS LIBERTY FOR ALL
Religious liberty is an inalienable right of every person.

As Americans we all share the responsibility to guard that right for every citizen. The Constitution of the United States with its Bill of Rights provides a civic framework of rights and responsibilities that enables Americans to work together for the common good in public education. There are established Religious Guidelines that have been adopted by the Board of Education. (Appendix)

II. PUBLIC SCHOOLS BELONG TO ALL CITIZENS
Public schools must model the democratic process and constitutional principles in the development of policies and curricula.

Policy decisions by officials or governing bodies should be made only after appropriate involvement of those affected by the decision and with due consideration for the rights of those holding dissenting views.

III. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS AND SCHOOLS
Parents are recognized as having the primary responsibility for the upbringing of their children, including education.

Parents who send their children to public schools delegate to public school educators some of the responsibility for their children's education. In so doing, parents acknowledge the crucial role of educators without abdicating their parental duty. Parents may also choose not to send their children to public schools and have their children educated at home or in private schools. However, private citizens, including business leaders and others also have the right to expect public education to give students tools for living in a productive democratic society. All citizens must have a shared commitment to offer students the best possible education. Parents have a special responsibility to participate in the activity of their children's schools. Children and schools benefit greatly when parents and educators work closely together to shape school policies and practices and to ensure that public education supports the societal values of their community without undermining family values and convictions.

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Commitment to Democratic Principles in Relation to Community, Staff, Students

Conflicts in Public Education (continued)

~~IV. CONDUCT AT PUBLIC MEETINGS~~

~~Civility and respect should prevail at all public meetings.~~

~~Personal attacks, name calling, ridicule, and similar tactics undermine the educational mission of our schools. Even when our differences are deep, all parties engaged in public discussion should treat one another with civility and respect, and should strive to be **accurate** and fair. (Through constructive dialogue we have much to learn from one another.)~~

Bylaw adopted by the Board: June 23, 1999
Bylaw readopted: May 3, 2007
Bylaw revised:

NEW FAIRFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS
New Fairfield, Connecticut

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Religious Guidelines

The New Fairfield Public Schools recognize and support the philosophy that respect for differences is intrinsic to the healthy development of a heterogeneous society. In a free society, all persons and groups are to be treated equitably regardless of ethnic, racial or religious differences. The rights and responsibilities of all individuals involved must be considered when determining the appropriateness of any decision regarding religious issues. Schools are the principal institution for inculcating an understanding of the beliefs or other cultures as well as for transmitting the ideals of our nation from one generation to the next.

We cannot know the world's culture without knowing something about the faiths that influenced them. The significance of religion in shaping moral and ethical precepts appeared early in American history when the writers of the Declaration of Independence affirmed that "all men are created equal" and "are endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable rights..." In order to protect our tradition of religious diversity and liberty, methods must be found to share the religious and philosophical beliefs and practices that are central to the lives of many people within the framework of the constitution.

A legal and logical distinction exists between teaching about religion and practicing religion. Public schools may not sponsor the practice of religion, but it is legally permissible and educationally responsible to ensure that study about religion occurs in the public school curricula.

To teach about religion is not to instruct in religion. Teaching about religion should be grounded in appreciation of the nature and variety of religious experiences from a historical, literary and cultural perspective. In light of these principles, the following are guidelines for teaching about religion in the New Fairfield schools:

I. Philosophical Guidelines

- Schools may educate about religion but may not promote or denigrate any religion.
- No religion nor the right to disbelieve, shall be advanced or disparaged.
- Schools may expose students to a diversity of religious views, but may not impose particular views.
- The unique needs and sensitivity of individuals from diverse backgrounds must be respected.
- Recognition of religious holidays should be a very small part of the total school program.

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II. Procedural Guidelines

- To determine the constitutionality of an activity and/or materials, all three of the following questions must be answered in the affirmative:
 - A. Purpose:** Is the purpose of the activity related to curriculum objectives?
 - B. Effect:** Is the effect of the activity one that does not promote religion?
 - C. Excessive Entanglement:** Does the activity not require or involve excessive relationship between the school and religious organization?
- Unique instructional events such as examinations and special presentations should not be scheduled on major religious holidays.
- Coercion of students on school property is prohibited.

III. Instructional Guidelines

- All programs and materials related to holidays **must** support curriculum objectives.
- Teachers should be able to distinguish between teaching **about** the religious holidays which is permissible and **celebrating** religious holidays which is not.
- Programs should educate students about the principle of religious liberty.
- The study of sacred writings is permissible for analysis of their literary and historic significance.
- The study of religious art or music as part of the study of history including lands and culture is appropriate.

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IV. Activity Guidelines

- While individual pieces of religious music may be performed for their musical value, the total effect of a music program should be non-religious.
- No student should be required to sing religious songs or create art that promotes a particular faith.
- The holidays to be recognized must be representative of the diverse religions of the world and must be of historical and cultural significance to the religions they represent.
- Decisions about special observances, i.e. parties, will be made by building administrators in collaboration with staff. Past practice may be considered.
- Based on input, Central Office will distribute a calendar to each building with markings for religious holidays to facilitate planning.
- Students have a limited right to free expression in public schools which includes distribution of written material. However, this activity should fall within the guidelines for distribution of any non-school literature. In addition, school officials must assure that there is no endorsement or appearance of endorsement of the material by the school.
- Student absences due to religious observances are excused. Therefore, assignments missed will be made up in accordance with the excused absence procedure of each school.
- Instances of religious intolerance and/or harassment will be addressed in accordance with school board policy and the disciplinary procedures of each school. In addition, such harassment may be subject to penalties in accordance with State and Federal Laws.

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Religious Guidelines Sample Questions and Answers

1. What is meant by "teaching about religion" in the public school?

"Teaching about religion" includes consideration of the beliefs and practices of religions; the role of religion in history and contemporary society; and religious themes in music, art, and literature.

The following statements distinguish between teaching about religion in public schools and religious indoctrination:

- The school's approach to religion is **academic**, not **devotional**.
- The school may strive for student **awareness** of religions, but should not press for student **acceptance** of any one religion.

2. Where does study about religion belong in the curriculum?

Study about religion is appropriate wherever it naturally arises in accordance with curriculum objectives. Social studies, literature, philosophy and the arts offer many opportunities for the inclusion of information about religions - their ideas and themes. Natural opportunities arise in discussions of the family and community life and in instruction about festivals and different cultures. Religion also may be taught about in special courses or units. Schools may offer such courses as world religions, sacred writings as literature, and the religious literature of the West and of the East.

3. Are Christmas trees and visits from Santa appropriate?

The Christmas tree and Santa Claus are symbols identified with the Christian tradition which have been secularized over time. It appears that a Christmas tree alone, with non-religious ornaments, or a visit from Santa would not be unconstitutional. Whether or not they are appropriate should be decided by individual building administrators in collaboration with staff. The decision should be based on district guidelines. Consideration should be given to the degree of time spent on non-curricular activities and the lack of connection to curriculum objectives.

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Religious Guidelines Sample Questions and Answers (continued)

4. Are holiday displays appropriate?

Decisions about holiday displays should take into account the amount of time being devoted to their creation and exhibition, the extent to which they are/are not related to curriculum objectives, and the extent to which they reflect study appropriate to the season as well as to a pluralistic society.

5. Should unique school activities be scheduled on religious holidays?

Every effort should be made to avoid scheduling school activities on religious holidays. In the event a conflict does arise, affected students must be excused and may not be penalized. Imposing a penalty would infringe upon their right to exercise freedom of religion.

6. May students be excused from participating in holiday activities?

Students from certain religious traditions may ask to be excused from classroom discussion or activities related to particular holidays. Some holidays, considered by many people to be secular, are viewed by others as having religious overtones. Such excusal requests, within reason, should be granted. Supervised alternate activities and/or early dismissal may be considered.

v Permission to be Excused from Activities

- a. Students and/or staff members wishing to be excused from activities that may be contrary to their religious beliefs may make that request of the appropriate teacher or supervisor, within a reasonable time period to allow accommodation to be made.
- b. Under usual circumstances requests to be excused from activities because of religious belief shall be approved. This approval does not necessarily imply absence from school. The guiding principle shall be accommodation. For students, parents will be contacted if appropriate.

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v Permission to be Excused from Activities (continued)

- c. Requests shall be denied by the building or department administrator or his/her designee when it is determined that:
- No legitimate concern about conflict with religious belief exists, or
 - Failure to participate in this activity in question, when examined within the context of the overall pattern of absences, would result in an inability to address necessary educational objectives (for students) or in an inability to perform adequately one's job expectations (for staff).

v Alternate Activities

When students or staff members are excused from participation in specific activities, appropriate alternative activities should be provided by the teacher or supervisor.

- a. Alternative activities may be requested by either the student/staff member or by the teacher/supervisor.
- b. The teacher or supervisor will determine the nature of the alternative activity, such that the same objectives are addressed but through a different activity.
- c. Staff members are responsible for making every reasonable effort to excuse students in such a manner as to maintain the dignity of and to avoid embarrassment for the student.

7. Can perfect attendance certificates be denied for absence due to religious observance?

No.

8. How does a class discuss controversial topics such as abortion rights or religious issues in a political campaign?

The important distinction is between reporting the facts, which may include the opinions of the groups or candidates and their opponents, as opposed to advancing or inhibiting the specific religious beliefs of the groups or candidates. ~~This is not basically different from reporting on the political positions of Democratic or Republican candidates.~~

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Religious Guidelines Sample Questions and Answers (continued)

- 9. How should a teacher respond when a student asks the teacher's opinion regarding some religious matter?**

In class, it would almost certainly be inappropriate to respond with an answer or engage in a debate of religious beliefs. On an individual but unofficial basis, the teacher may respond at his or her discretion. However, it is important to avoid egocentricity and keep the focus on encouraging the student to “grapple” with the issue rather than on emphasizing the personal beliefs of the teacher.

- 10. Can students be exempt from saying the Pledge of Allegiance? ~~on religious grounds?~~**

Yes. These students who have religious or conscientious objections may be excused from participating in the Pledge of Allegiance.

- 11. Should the teacher suggest that the silent meditation moment be used as a time for silent prayer?**

No.

These guidelines, questions and answers are modeled after similar ones in the religious guidelines of various school systems, committees and publications including Teaching Tolerance magazine (Spring, 1994), Educational Leadership magazine (January, 1994), religious policies of Brookfield, CT, Danbury, CT and Boulder, Colorado public school systems.