

Religious Observances and School Prayer

Separation of Church and State

In accordance with the mandate of the Constitution of the United States, it is the policy of this Board that the public schools will, at all times and in all ways, be neutral in matters of religion. The Board recognizes that the First Amendment prevents the government from establishing religion and protects privately initiated religious expression and activities from government interference and discrimination.

These requirements need not preclude nor hinder the public schools in fulfilling their responsibility to educate students to be tolerant and respectful of religious diversity. The district also recognizes that one of its educational responsibilities is to advance the student's knowledge and appreciation of the role that religion has played in the social, cultural, and historical development of civilization.

Therefore, the district 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 religious beliefs unless there are clear issues of compelling public interest that would prevent it.

School Prayer

In accordance with guidance issued by the U.S. Department of Education, the following principles shall govern matters related to prayer in the schools.

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 that are applied to other privately initiated expressive activities.

The organization of prayer groups and activities shall be permitted to the same extent that other non-curricular student activities are allowed.

School employees may not discourage or encourage prayer nor actively participate in such activities with students. This policy, however, does not preclude these individuals from participating in prayer or other religious activities outside of their official capacities.

Students are free to pray silently or not to pray. Students may be permitted to attend off-premise religious instruction and may be excused from class to remove a significant burden on their religious exercise.

Students may express their religious beliefs through the medium of homework, artwork or other written or oral assignments and shall be graded on curricular factors.

Students who may be selected to speak at school events or extra-curricular activities may not be selected on any basis that favors or disfavors religious speech. The Board may elect to issue a disclaimer to clarify that student speech is the speaker's, not the schools.

Students and others chosen to speak at graduation must be selected on the basis of neutral criteria and must retain control over the content of their expression, which may not be restricted because it is religious. The Board may elect to issue a disclaimer to clarify that such speech is that of the speaker and not the school.

Holiday Celebration and Observances

The building Principal is responsible for monitoring compliance with this policy. Pertinent information will be included in the student, parent, and staff handbooks, as necessary.

Absence for Religious Observance

Student absences for religious observations shall be excused. Furthermore, such absences should not prohibit receipt of attendance related awards nor impact student grades. When developing the school calendar, the Board of Education should consider observing all holidays celebrated by the diverse groups that make up the Manchester Public Schools.

Recognition of Religious Holidays

The objective study of religious holidays provides a natural opportunity to promote appreciation and respect for other religions and cultures beyond Judeo-Christian beliefs.

1. Recognition of religious holidays will not dominate the educational program and must support curricular objectives.
2. Religion must be afforded dignity, but neither advanced nor disparaged.
3. Decorations, which are part of custom, that have no direct religious meaning may be displayed.
4. Programs should focus on seasonal rather than religious themes inclusive of concerts, enrichment programs and parent-teacher organization sales.
5. Performances, which recognize holidays, must be of an artistic nature, not religious, and program selections should not, by their nature, exclude students from participation.
6. The cafeteria staff will consider religious dietary restrictions when planning menus.

7. Parents may exclude their children from programs involving the recognition of religious holidays or if celebration is in conflict with family beliefs. A written request for exclusion should be sent to the building administrator.

Adopted: April 14, 2003

Revised: February, 2017

Administrative Guidelines

The issues of separation of church and state, school prayer, holiday celebrations, observances and recognition shall be governed by the following principle:

Religious activity sponsored by the government is forbidden. Religious activity that is initiated by private individuals is protected.

Accordingly, school officials must remain neutral in their treatment of religion and shall exhibit neither favoritism toward nor hostility against religious expression.

School officials shall adhere to these guidelines:

1. Teachers and public school officials may not lead their classes in prayer, devotional readings from religious sources or other religious activities.
2. School officials may not attempt to persuade or compel students to participate in prayer or other religious activities.
3. Public school officials may not unilaterally decide that prayer should be included in school-sponsored events.
4. School officials may not grant religious speakers preferential access to public audiences, or otherwise select public speakers on the basis that favors religious speech.
5. Public school students may voluntarily pray at any time before, during or after the school day when not engaged in school activities or instruction provided that such activity is not disruptive to the educational process.
6. Students may pray with fellow students during the school day on the same terms and conditions that they may engage in other conversation or speech, which is not disruptive to the educational program.
7. Local school authorities possess substantial discretion to impose rules of order and pedagogical restrictions on student activities, but they may not structure or administer such rules to discriminate against student prayer or religious speech.
8. Not all religious speech taking place in public schools or at school-sponsored events is governmental speech and therefore is protected if initiated by private individuals.

April 14, 2003