

RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION IN THE SCHOOLS

An important responsibility of the Huron school board is to promote mutual understanding and respect for the interests and rights of all individuals regarding their religious beliefs. Student and employee freedom of speech regarding religious expression shall be allowed within the parameters of existing state and federal law. Guidelines regarding these parameters are specified below.

OFFICIAL NEUTRALITY REGARDING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES

Public school staff members, when acting in those capacities, are representatives of the state and are prohibited from soliciting or encouraging religious activity. Staff members are also prohibited from discouraging activity because of its religious content and from soliciting or encouraging anti-religious activity.

THE EQUAL ACCESS ACT

The Equal Access Act is designed to ensure that, consistent with the First Amendment, student religious activities are accorded the same access to public school facilities as are student secular activities.

Student religious groups at public schools have the same right of access to school facilities as is provided for other comparable student groups. Schools that allow one or more student non-curriculum-related clubs to meet on its premises during non-instructional time may not refuse access to student religious groups.

PRAYER SERVICES AND WORSHIP

A meeting, as defined and protected by the Equal Access Act, may include a prayer service, Bible reading, or other worship exercise.

Schools must allow non-school-sponsored student groups to use the school media (including the public address system, the school newspaper, and the school bulletin board) to announce their meetings on the same terms as other student groups. When meetings are announced, students may be informed that religious meetings and student organizations are not school-sponsored.

LUNCH TIME AND RECESS

Schools shall allow students to meet during their lunch periods, other non-instructional times during the school day, in addition to before and after the school day.

STUDENT PRAYER AND RELIGIOUS DISCUSSION

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment does not prohibit purely private religious speech by students. Students have the same right to engage in individual or group prayer and religious discussion during the school day as they do to engage in other comparable activities. For example, students may read their Bibles or other scriptures, say grace before meals, and pray before tests to the same extent they may engage in comparable non-disruptive activities.

Students may pray in a non-disruptive manner when not engaged in school activities or instruction. Specifically, students in informal settings, such as cafeterias and hallways, may pray and discuss their religious views with each other, subject to the same rules of order as apply to other student activities and speech. School officials shall intercede to stop student speech that constitutes harassment aimed at a student or a group of students.

Students may participate in before- or after-school events with religious content on the same terms as they may participate in other non-curriculum activities on school premises. School officials may neither discourage nor encourage participation in such an event.

The right to engage in voluntary prayer or religious discussion free from discrimination does not include the right to have a captive audience listen or to compel other students to participate. Teachers and school administrators will ensure that no student is in any way coerced to participate in a religious activity.

GRADUATION PRAYER AND BACCALAUREATE

School officials may not mandate or organize prayer at graduation nor organize or require attendance at the baccalaureate ceremony. A school may not extend preferential treatment in the baccalaureate ceremony.

TEACHING ABOUT RELIGION

Schools may not provide religious instruction *per se*, but they may provide information about religion—e.g., the Bible or other religious writings, the history of religion, comparative religion, the Bible as literature, the role of religion in the history of the United States, etc. Similarly, it is permissible to consider religious influences on art, music, literature, and social studies. Although public schools may provide information about religious holidays, including their religious aspects, and may celebrate the secular aspects of holidays, schools may not observe holidays as religious events or promote such observance by students.

STUDENT ASSIGNMENTS

Students may express their beliefs about religion in the form of homework, artwork, and other written and oral assignments free of discrimination based on the religious content of their submissions. Such home and classroom work should be judged by consistently applied academic standards.

DISTRIBUTION OF RELIGIOUS LITERATURE

Students may 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 non-school literature generally, but they may not single out religious literature for special regulation.

RELIGIOUS EXCUSALS

Schools may excuse individual students from lessons that are objectionable to the beliefs of the students or their parents. However, students may not be excused from lessons that may simply contain inconsistencies with their religious beliefs or practices. School officials may neither encourage nor discourage students from availing themselves of an excusal option.

RELEASED TIME

Schools have the discretion to dismiss students to off-premises religious instruction, provided that schools do not encourage or discourage participation or penalize those who do not attend. Schools may not allow religious instruction by outsiders on school premises during the school day.