

Teaching about Religion

The Portsmouth School Board believes that the observance of religious holidays is not the responsibility of the public schools. Because a public school is not a place of worship, instructional materials, activities, decorations or assembly programs should not promote any religion. They should be seasonal, not religious.

The Board recognizes, however, that religion influences many areas of education, such as literature and history, and that teaching about religion's role in civilization does have a place in the public schools. Moreover, it is proper for teachers to teach and emphasize the generally accepted moral and ethical principles of all religions and to provide information and opportunities, which allow the study of various forms of religion. In summary, it is proper for teachers to teach about religion, rather than to teach particular sectarian beliefs.

In the process of teaching about religion, use of the Bible or other sacred documents as literary forms, or the use of music, art, drama, or other materials is acceptable. Such curricular aids should be utilized in a prudent and objective manner while teaching about the cultural and religious heritage of a particular holiday.

The use of religious symbols, provided they are used only as examples of cultural or religious heritage, is permissible as a teaching aid or resource. Religious symbols may be displayed only on a temporary basis as part of the academic program. Students may choose to create artwork with religious symbols, but teachers should not assign or require such creations. Decorations not tied to an academic program should be seasonal in nature, rather than religious.

While there are appropriate educational benefits to teaching about diverse religious traditions and cultures, teachers and administrators must avoid creating the impression that one set of holidays or beliefs is favored, or more acceptable than any other. It is imperative that tolerance of all religious beliefs, and the respect of others' rights to have different beliefs, be a central focus of those aspects of the curriculum, which touch on religion. Further, the Portsmouth School Board provides the following questions/guidelines for staff as they plan holiday activities.

- Do I have a distinct educational purpose in mind? If so, what is it? It should not be the purpose of the public schools to celebrate or observe religious holidays.
- If I use holidays as an opportunity to teach about religion, am I balanced and fair in my approach?
- Does the planned activity have the primary effect of advancing or inhibiting religion? Does it, for example, promote one faith over another or even religion in general? Remember that the school's approach should be academic not devotional. It is never appropriate for public schools to proselytize.