Religion in the Schools

Katy Independent School District has prepared this question and answer document as a basis for academic planning as well as a platform for creating understanding, tolerance, and respect for the diverse religious traditions and cultures represented in the school community. It is the District’s goal to create and maintain a positive learning environment for all students – an environment in which no student feels excluded or identified with a religion that is not their own.

1. **May teachers teach about religion, religious holidays, and religious customs?**

Teaching about the impact of religious belief and practice on society, history, artistic expression, etc. is necessary to address the essential knowledge and skills in certain courses at various grade levels. Therefore, teachers do present lessons on religion, religious holidays or religious customs if the content is related to specific objectives in the Katy ISD curriculum in the content area or grade being taught. Teaching about the historical, contemporary and cultural aspects of religion/holidays of various world religions is subject to certain restrictions. The information must be presented in an objective manner that does not have the effect of advancing or inhibiting religion. The study of religion, in any aspect, should reflect the world’s/nation’s diversity and bountiful heritage.

As stated in *Finding Common Ground*, teachers must be alert to the distinction between teaching about religious holidays, which is permissible, and celebrating religious holidays, which is not.

2. **Does the curriculum at each grade level include objectives pertaining to religion in some manner?**

No. Neither the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) nor the Katy ISD curriculum include objectives at all grade levels that pertain to the teaching of religion. Knowing this, parents may better understand why lessons related to religion or religious practices are allowed at one grade level and not another. The determination of what is taught is dictated by the District’s approved curriculum which is based on the essential knowledge and skills defined by the State.

3. **May school assemblies or special events include religious music or drama?**

Yes. Religious music or dramas may be included in school events which are part of a secular academic program. The content of school assemblies, concerts, and programs must be primarily secular, objective, and educational, and not focus 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. In other words, there should be balance.

In choosing music selections, for example, religious music may be chosen as long as it does not dominate the program or include only music from a single religious tradition. Forbidding music, on the other hand, that is religious in nature could be considered hostile, not neutral, toward religion.

4. **Can a student be required to participate in a lesson or an activity that is religious in nature?**

Student participation in any such lesson or activity must be voluntary. If parents elect not to have their child participate in a particular lesson, sing a particular song, or take part in a performance that is contrary to their religious or philosophical beliefs, the request should be accommodated in a reasonable and professional manner. Students should not be penalized for not participating in a lesson or an activity that they find offensive. If a performance is part of a course requirement, it is the teacher’s or sponsor’s responsibility to ensure that concerts are not dominated by religious music or music associated with a particular religion.

In activities involving art, drama, or literature, religious themes are permitted as long as they are related to curriculum objectives. In all cases, students must be provided alternative assignments or the ability to opt out of a particular activity that is contrary to their religious beliefs without any grade penalty.

Likewise, if students are involved in a comparative, academic study of religions, students could elect to draw or design a religious symbol or write a religious-related poem or composition that is related to the course of study; however, a teacher should not assign or dictate the creation of a particular product of a religious nature.

5. **Are students allowed to pray in school?**

The Texas Education Code makes it clear that students have an “absolute right to individually, voluntarily, and silently pray or meditate in school in a manner that does not disrupt the instructional setting or other activities of the school.”

6. **May religious symbols be used in the classroom or as decorations during special holiday seasons?**

Religious symbols such as crosses, crèches and menorahs, may be used as teaching aids in the classroom provided the symbols are displayed as an example of the cultural and religious heritage of the holiday that is being taught as a part of the District’s approved curriculum. The display of these items must be temporary, limiting their use to specific and appropriate teaching activities. Religious symbols may not be used as decorations.
Symbols of religious holidays which have acquired secular meaning, such as Christmas trees or candy canes, are considered permissible by most groups. Nonetheless, the focus should be on balance. In decorating for the holidays, campuses must be sensitive to the diversity of religions and cultures represented in the student population as a whole.

7. **Is there a standard District policy on holiday parties or celebrations?**

No. There is no standard policy on holiday parties or celebrations. However, all classroom activities must be directly related to the TEKS or the District’s approved curriculum. Elementary schools are allowed to have two classroom or grade level parties per year. The nature of the parties may be dictated by a particular course of study, a special campus curriculum initiative, or some other type of celebration of learning or student achievement.

There is no campus dictate regarding the color theme for grade-level parties or celebrations. However, some campuses do elect to use their school colors for all special events as a means of promoting unity and school spirit.

Campuses that choose to put up secular decorations such as a tree, sleigh, or reindeer should make certain that the decorations do not circumvent the constitution by appearing to sponsor a religious celebration or promote a particular religion.

8. **Is it true that students and employees can not wear seasonal clothing that depicts images associated with a particular religious holiday?**

Students may wear any clothing that meets the District’s dress code. For example, there is no problem with a student wearing a sweater with appliqués of Christmas trees, reindeer, a menorah, angels, or a manger scene. On the other hand, if a young lady were to wear a skirt with a religious image that was too short, the skirt would be disallowed because it did not meet the dress code.

Employees, like students, are free to wear holiday-related apparel or jewelry of their choosing as long as their clothing is appropriate in a professional setting and does not communicate a preference for a particular religion.

9. **Can students meet on campus before or after school to pray, have Bible studies, or discuss topics associated with their religious beliefs?**

Katy ISD policy does allow secondary students to form noncurriculum-related clubs or groups under a “limited open forum.” These clubs or groups which are required to meet outside the instructional day, must be student-initiated, student-sponsored, and student-led. Any group wishing to meet on campus is required to complete a simple application form and locate a staff member willing to serve as a monitor for the activity. The function of the monitor is only to
ensure the safety of students and maintain an orderly environment on campus. The monitor is prohibited from any involvement in the planning, advertising or facilitation of the meetings.

10. **Can holiday cards be distributed?**

The distribution of any type of nonschool-related material by outside groups or parents is addressed at GKDA (REGULATION) which states that only nonprofit organizations may submit items for approval for distribution to students. Distribution of non-school-related items by students is addressed in the Administrative Regulation at FNAA.

Individual employees desiring to distribute holiday cards to their peers may do so as long as they do not use the internal mail system which would amount to circumventing the US Mail.

Likewise, campuses and departments may not use public funds to purchase nonschool-related or holiday cards and may not use the internal mail system for distribution. Nor should a campus or department choose a card that promotes a particular religious belief since the District cannot appear to promote religion.

11. **Are student speakers at graduation ceremonies allowed to express religious viewpoints in their speeches?**

Yes. The District, by law, has adopted a local policy at FNA that established a limited open forum for student speakers. At the same time, all speeches must be related to the purpose of the graduation ceremony. The campus administration is allowed to prohibit expression that promotes illegal activities, contain defamatory statements about public figures or others, or speech that is likely to result in a material and substantial disruption of the graduation ceremony.