

Understanding Religious Rights in Schools

Schools frequently are asked questions about what can and cannot be done by parents and students to celebrate or acknowledge the many holidays that fall during the school year, including Ramadan, Thanksgiving, Chanukah, Christmas and Kwanzaa. To help parents and students better understand the proper role of religion in the public schools, the District would recommend reviewing KISD Board Policies EMI (LOCAL) ("Miscellaneous Instructional Policies: Study of Religion"); FNA (LOCAL) ("Student Rights and Responsibilities: Student Expression") and FNAA (LOCAL) ("Student Expression: Distribution of Nonschool Literature"), all of which address these topics in more detail. The Katy ISD Board Policies may be found online at <http://www.tasb.org/policy/pol/private/101914/>.

When considering issues of religion in the public schools, it is important to remember that there is a distinction between private religious speech, which is protected, and state-sponsored religious speech, which is prohibited. Students may talk about religious holidays (when talking is appropriate), they may say "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Chanukah" or other related holiday greetings, and they may wear whatever clothing they choose (color, wording, or otherwise) that complies with the District's dress code. Students may distribute literature that has a religious message or hand others items, such as bracelets, bearing a religious message or symbolism at school, on the same basis as non-religious items, so long as any such distributions are done in accordance with Board Policy FNAA (LOCAL). However, the schools themselves cannot show favor regarding one religious belief over another – they must remain neutral.

Generally speaking, Katy ISD schools may use themes such as Ramadan, Thanksgiving, Chanukah, Christmas and Kwanzaa as a part of cultural celebrations as long as the celebrations comply with Katy ISD policy EMI (LOCAL). EMI (LOCAL) allows the inclusion of religion in the study of history, culture, literature, music, drama, and art, so long as the District's approach is secular and academic, not devotional. With regards to school parties – the number of which is strictly limited due to state guidelines that govern the serving of foods of minimal nutritional value (i.e. snacks) -- Katy ISD makes every effort to tie each party's theme to the curriculum that the students are studying. If the school allows students and parents to bring items to the party, then students and parents may, as private citizens, bring religiously themed items to the party, as the items fall within the Content Limitations of FNAA (LOCAL). Likewise, if the school allows students and parents to exchange gifts and/or hand out written materials at the party, students and parents may give gifts or hand out written materials of a religious nature [again, as long as the items fall within the Content Limitations of FNAA (LOCAL)]. In deciding whether to bring items, gifts, or other materials to hand out, we would encourage parents to be mindful of the different religious beliefs represented in our schools. Katy ISD hopes to create an environment where all children feel valued and included.