

## RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION

P5203

The Westford Public Schools are committed to respecting and embracing cultural and religious diversity, while recognizing the need to respect the rights of students to observe or not observe religion.

The School Committee believes that a well-rounded education will include teaching about religion in the context of history, literature, art, music, or other core subjects. Religious traditions, including holidays, provide an excellent opportunity for learning about different cultures and allow for fostering an understanding of how religion affects those cultures.

The School Committee therefore supports factual and objective teaching about religions, religious holidays, and religious differences. Such instruction is encouraged in the schools since insights in this area can enhance the mutual understanding which benefits all people in a pluralistic society.

The tone and spirit of school activities must respect the many religious differences in the school population, neither promoting any religion nor inhibiting a child's right to practice his or her own religion in a manner that does not interfere with school operations or the rights of others. Students of all religious backgrounds (or no religion) should feel that the schools respect their beliefs.

To be consistent with the spirit and letter of the law, and to avoid compromising any student's religious freedoms, the following guidelines are established:

**Excused Absences** - The Westford Public Schools will allow excused absences to celebrate religious holidays.

**Notification of Absence** - Parents are expected to follow procedures for 'reporting an absence' as stipulated in the student handbook.

**Religious Holiday Observance** - A student may not be penalized for his/her observance of a religious holiday. The student is expected to complete work impacted by the religious observance within one week of the holiday. Any missed tests or quizzes shall be taken within a week of the missed day, at a time mutually agreeable to the teacher and the student. At the Elementary and Middle School, it may be necessary to involve the student's parent/guardian for transportation consideration. Staff and teachers shall provide students with class notes or syllabus, and any assignments prior to the absence if requested and if available. Otherwise these items shall be provided upon return from a religious holiday.

**Sports and Extracurricular Activities** - Students shall not be penalized because they are unable to participate in a sporting event, practice, try-out or any other extra- curricular activity due to their observance of a religious holiday.

**Religious Symbols** - As part of their teaching about religions and the role religion plays in history, literature, culture, and the arts, teachers may display religious symbols and displays associated with religious holidays as teaching aids or resources. No religious symbols should be represented on teacher generated papers and materials unless these materials directly relate to curricular study about the religion or culture.

While recognizing that the Westford Public Schools cannot promote a religion or religion in general, the School Committee believes that religious symbols and artifacts can be presented in an educational context as components of a broader display of cultural and religious celebrations. The School Committee recognizes that the inclusion of multiple religious' perspectives in a display may have the benefit of providing a sense of belonging for students not participating in one of the major religions events of the season. For these reasons, the School Committee provides the following guidance

Any public displays or exhibits associated with religious holidays shall be designed to help students appreciate the variety and value of traditions around the world, and shall not be solely focused on one or two specific holidays. School common areas may be used to display artifacts and/or symbols commonly associated with a religion only when a wide range of cultures and religions are represented in those areas throughout the academic year.

Freedom of Expression - Students' personal expression of religious beliefs, protected by the First Amendment, are appropriate and encouraged. In completing an assignment, a student may choose to include religious statements or symbols and these works may be displayed in ways consistent with any other student-generated work. Homework, art work, and written and oral assignments that express a student's religious beliefs should be judged by ordinary academic standards and relevance.

In addition, despite everyone's best efforts, there may be times when a student or his or her parent feels the need for the student to be excused from an activity that is objectionable based on religion or personal belief or practice. The District will excuse such student without causing embarrassment or penalty to the student.

Music -Student music performances may contain pieces chosen for their musical content and may represent one or more religious or cultural traditions. The selection of music should not focus on a holiday or denomination and should represent balance among religions. Religious music may be part of such concerts, but no child shall be penalized or made embarrassed for choosing not to participate. Decisions about musical selections are curricular decisions to be made by the Music Department.

Massachusetts General Law References:

M.G.L. 71:31 - Bible Reading (ruled unconstitutional)

Westford Public Schools Policy References:

P4203 - Harassment

P5303 - Harassment

P5304 - Bullying

P5323 - Student Dress

Policy Adopted: April 2001

Policy Revised: November 7, 2016



WESTFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
Westford, MA