

Swan River Montessori Charter School

Adopted: 11.9.11  
Reviewed: 10.20.20

**Religious Expression Guidelines**

PURPOSE

The purpose of this policy is to clarify the extent to which religious expression can be addressed in the public. The guidelines for this policy were modeled after the “Religious Expression in Public Schools” sent to public schools in August of 1995 and revised in 1998. The full document can be found at [www.ed.gov/Speeches/08-1995/religion.html](http://www.ed.gov/Speeches/08-1995/religion.html).

GUIDELINES

Student Prayer and Religious Discussion. The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment does not prohibit purely private religious speech by students. Students, therefore, 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. Local school authorities possess substantial discretion to impose rules of order and other pedagogical restrictions on student activities, but they may not structure or administer such rules to discriminate against religious activity or speech.

Generally, students may pray in a non-disruptive manner when not engaged in school activities or instruction, and subject to the rules that normally pertain in the applicable setting. 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. Students may also speak to, and attempt to persuade, their peers about religious topics just as they do with regard to political topics. School officials, however, should intercede to stop student speech that constitutes harassment aimed at a student or a group of students.

Students may also participate in before or after school events with religious content, such as “see you at the flag pole” gatherings, on the same terms as they may participate in other non-curriculum activities on school premises. School officials may neither discourage nor encourage participation at 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 should ensure that no student is, in any way, coerced to participate in religious activity.

Official Neutrality Regarding Religious Activity. Teachers and school administrators, when acting in those capacities, are representatives of the state and are prohibited by the Establishment Clause from soliciting or encouraging religious activity, and from participating in such activity with students.

Teachers and administrators also are prohibited from discouraging activity because of its religious content, and from soliciting or encouraging antireligious activity.

Teaching About Religion. Public schools may not provide religious instruction, but they may teach *about* religion, including the Bible or other scripture: the history of religion, comparative religion, the Bible (or other scripture) as literature, and the role of religion in the history of the United States and other countries are all permissible public school subjects. Similarly, it is permissible to consider religious influences on art, music, literature, and social studies. Although public schools may teach 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 ordinary academic standards of substance and relevance, and against other legitimate pedagogical concerns identified by the school.

Religious Literature. Students have the right to 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. Subject to applicable state laws, schools have substantial discretion to excuse individual students from lessons that are objectionable to the student or the student's parents on religious or other conscientious grounds. However, students generally do not have a federal right to be excused from lessons that may be inconsistent with their religious beliefs or practices.

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

Teaching Values. Though schools must be neutral with respect to religion, they may play an active role with respect to teaching civic values and virtues, and the moral code that holds us together as a community. The fact that some of these values are held also by religion does not make it unlawful to teach them in school.

Student Garb. Schools have substantial discretion in adopting policies relating to student dress and school uniforms. Students generally have no federal right to be exempted from religiously-neutral and generally applicable school dress rules based on their religious beliefs or practices; however, schools may not single out religious attire in general, or attire of a particular religion, for prohibition or regulation. Students may display religious messages on items of clothing to the same extent that they are permitted to display other comparable messages. Religious messages may not be singled out for suppression, but rather are subject to the same rules as generally apply to comparable messages.