

## **RECOGNITION OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND CUSTOMS**

Since its founding, the United States has grown from a nation of relatively few religious differences to one of countless religious groups. This expanding pluralism challenges the public schools to deal creatively and sensitively with students who belong to one of many or no religious faiths.

School officials and teachers, as well as parents and students, must approach this challenge as an opportunity to work cooperatively for the sake of good education and good will among people.

In developing guidelines about acknowledgement of religion, Lewiston Public Schools base its policy in the shared commitment of respect for individual religious beliefs expressed in the constitutional guarantee of religious liberty. This means that Lewiston Public Schools may neither promote nor inhibit religious belief or non-belief, so long as expressions of religious belief or non-belief are consistent with school rules and respect the rights of others. Lewiston Public Schools recognize, however, that one of its educational goals is to advance students' knowledge and appreciation of the role that religion has played in the social, cultural and historical development of civilization. It would be neither possible nor desirable for our schools simply to ignore religion and avoid all materials with religious theme or implication.

It further recognizes that although awareness of legal issues is essential in considering religion and public education, the law does not supply answers to every question. Within the current legal framework, our schools; the School Committee; administrators; teachers; parents; and students must make many practical decisions regarding religious holidays. This work can be done by showing sensitivity to the needs of every student and by showing a willingness to steer a course between the avoidance of all references to religion on the one hand and the promotion of religion on the other.

The intent of this policy is to articulate guidelines which reflect and balance the academic and instructional mission of our schools, the law and legal guidelines relating to separation of church and state, the richness and diversity of our population and sensitivity to the rights and dignity of the individual.

To achieve the intent of this policy, Lewiston Public Schools will offer to its teaching staff opportunities for professional development which address the law and legal guidelines and the need for sensitivity when dealing with issues of religious beliefs and customs and also promote open school/home communications in these matters.

## **RULES**

### **OBSERVANCE OF RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS**

The practice of Lewiston Public Schools shall be as follows:

1. Several holidays during the year which have a religious origin, but have acquired secular meaning may be acknowledged in the public schools.
2. When acknowledging such holidays, the historical and contemporary values and the origin of those religious holidays will be explained in an unbiased and objective manner without sectarian indoctrination.
3. Music, art, literature and drama having religious themes or basis are permitted as part of the curriculum for school-sponsored activities and programs if presented primarily in a secular and objective manner. The duration of such programs and activities which should be linked to the school's curriculum should not exceed a period of time equivalent to the academic value of the program or activity
4. Religious symbols such as a cross, menorah, crescent, Star of David, crèche, symbols of Native American religions or other symbols that are a part of a religious holiday are permitted as teaching aids or resources, provided such symbols are displayed as examples of the cultural and religious heritage of the holiday and are temporary in nature. Among these holidays are included Christmas, Easter, Passover, Hanukkah, St. Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day Thanksgiving and Halloween.
5. Any acknowledgement of a holiday shall emphasize the historical, cultural and social value of the holiday and the associated religion and shall not be used to endorse any religion or holiday.
6. The right of parents to excuse their children from school attendance for purposes of religious observance is understood and such absence will entail no penalty, academic or otherwise.

7. Students may be excused from participating in practices which are contrary to their religious beliefs.

## **RELIGION IN THE CURRICULUM**

Religious institutions and orientations are central to human experience, past and present. An education excluding such a significant aspect of human history would be incomplete. It is essential that the teaching about and not of religion be conducted in a factual, objective and respectful manner.

Therefore, the practice of Lewiston Public Schools shall be as follows:

1. The school system supports the inclusion of religious literature, music, drama and the arts in the curriculum and in school activities, provided it is intrinsic to the learning experience in the various fields of study and is presented objectively.
2. The emphasis on religious themes in the arts, literature and history should be only as extensive as necessary for a balanced and comprehensive study of these areas. Such studies should never foster any particular religious tenets or demean any religious beliefs.
3. Student-initiated expressions to questions or assignments which reflect their belief or non-belief about a religious theme shall be accommodated, so long as they are otherwise consistent with school rules and respect the rights of others.

Legal Reference: Title 1 M.R.S.A., Section 111-A-118

Cross Reference: JEA Compulsory Attendance Ages

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