

NORTH BRANFORD BOARD OF EDUCATION

SERIES 3000 — INSTRUCTION

P3012

SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE, PROTECTION OF PRIVATE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Instruction

Ceremonies and Observances

Separation of Church and State

In accordance with the Constitution of the United States prohibiting the establishment of religion by the government, it is the policy of the North Branford Board of Education that the public schools will, at all times and in all ways, be neutral in matters of religion.

The requirement of neutrality need not preclude nor hinder the public schools in fulfilling their responsibility to educate students to be tolerant and respectful of religious diversity. The Board also recognizes that one of its educational responsibilities is to advance student knowledge and appreciation of the role that religion has played and continues to play in the social, cultural, and historical development of civilization.

Therefore, the Board directs that religion will be approached from an objective, curriculum-related perspective, encouraging all students and staff to be aware of the diversity of beliefs present in our community and respectful of all religious and/or non-religious views.

Absences Consistent with Religious Observation and/or Viewpoint

Student absences for bona fide religious observances shall be considered excused absences. Such absences shall not count against a student for receipt of attendance awards nor impact student grades and other recognition for achievement. Students and staff should be excused without penalty from participating in activities that are contrary to religious beliefs unless genuine pedagogical concerns and the educational benefit of the activity are found to outweigh the individual's interest in not being present for the activity. Parents who wish to exclude their children from school for observance of a religious occasion, or from programs involving the recognition of religious holidays should submit a written request to the principal. Staff who wish to be excused from particular school activities for reasons of religious conviction should submit a written request to the Principal.

Recognition of Religious Holidays in the Curriculum

The objective study of religious holidays provides a natural opportunity to promote an appreciation for and respect for diversity. All religions must be afforded equal dignity, but none advanced nor disparaged. Seasonal programs and displays should focus on seasonal rather than religious themes. Performances which recognize holidays must be of an artistic nature, rather than religious. Religious music must not dominate any school program. Program selections should not, by their nature, exclude students from participation on the basis of religion.

Religious Messages at Graduation and Other School-Sponsored Events

School officials may not mandate or organize prayer at graduation or other school-sponsored activities, nor select speakers that favor religious speech such as prayer. Because speeches given at such events are likely to be perceived by the audience to represent the position of the school and endorsed by the school, speeches may be edited or reviewed to eliminate inappropriate language and content including but not limited to religious views. School officials, employees, students, or others may not deliver prayers at graduation and other school activities. Ceremonial reading from sacred texts, such as the Bible or the Koran, during graduation or other school-sponsored activities is not permitted.

Constitutionally Protected Prayer

A student may engage in private prayer or other religious activities, including engaging other students in religious discussion, when not engaged in school activities or instruction, so long as the prayer or religious activity does not disrupt the educational process. A staff member may engage in private prayer at appropriate non-instructional times during the day, and may engage other staff in religious discussion during appropriate non-instructional times, on the same terms and conditions that staff are permitted to meet, participate in, or discuss, matters unrelated to school business. Staff members may not pray with or vocally in the presence of students in school, or in their capacity as a teacher or representative of the school. Personal religious activity may not interfere with the rights and well-being of other students and staff. A student or staff member who wishes to engage in prayer during the school day and requires a separate space to do so may submit a request to the Principal for appropriate space to be provided.

Notwithstanding any rule or policy to the contrary, no student in the North Branford Public Schools shall be prevented from participating in constitutionally protected prayer. As required by the No Child Left Behind Act, the Superintendent will, by October 1 of each year, certify in writing to the State of Connecticut that such policy is in full force and effect. The Superintendent will inform staff, parents/guardians and students of this policy through notices published in the student handbook and by other appropriate means.

Expression of Religious Content Through School Assignments

Students are not prohibited from expressing religious beliefs in homework, artwork, and other written and oral projects or presentations within the context of the assignment. Grading shall be based on academic standards without regard to religious content or message. Students may not make religious presentations to other students in the classroom unless it is determined by the teacher or administrator that such presentation is relevant to the curriculum and legitimate pedagogical concerns.

Religious Clubs or Organizations

See Board Policy _____.

Distribution of Religious Materials

See Board Policy _____.

Legal References

No Child Left Behind

U.S. Department of Education Guidance on Constitutionally Protected Prayer in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools

Policy Adopted: 6/17/04