

ANCHORAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT
ANCHORAGE, ALASKA

ASD MEMORANDUM #30 (2004-2005)

October 11, 2004

TO: SCHOOL BOARD

FROM: OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

SUBJECT: SCHOOL BOARD POLICY REVISIONS: SECTION 350 -
RECOGNITION OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND CUSTOMS AND
SECTION 350.1 - OBSERVANCE OF RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS (SECOND
READING)

RECOMMENDATION:

It is the Administration's recommendation that the School Board approve on Second Reading, the proposed attached changes to School Board Policy 350 Recognition of Religious Beliefs and Customs and 350.1 Observance of Religious Holidays.

PERTINENT FACTS:

Beginning in October 2003, in response to several community concerns, a committee composed of music and art teachers, principals, music and art curriculum personnel, community members and a representative from the University of Alaska Anchorage met several times to review the current Anchorage School Board policies 350 and 350.1. The purpose of the committee was to develop some guidelines for teachers and principals for the 2003-2004 school year and also to propose specific policy changes to the School Board's Policy Subcommittee.

The purpose of the developed guidelines was to foster a greater awareness of the District's diverse population and to encourage the very best use of instruction time throughout the school year. In developing the guidelines, the committee worked from the framework of the Religious Neutrality Requirements utilized in District of Columbia public schools. A draft of the finalized guidelines was disseminated to staff throughout the District in November 2003. The use of the guidelines resulted not only in increased sensitivity to the diverse cultural aspects of the District, but to actual practices at school sites.

In undertaking a review of the current School Board policy on this matter, policies from a variety of school districts were examined for exemplars. Additionally, information

was gleaned from the National Association of Music Education along with other relevant articles and resources.

The committee then drafted proposed new policies 350 and 350.1 to the School Board Subcommittee. The School Board Policy Subcommittee made revisions to the suggested policy from the aforementioned committee. The new policies 350 and 350.1 are a substitution for the similarly numbered existing policies.

The School Board Policy Subcommittee reviewed the proposed policies at their meetings on August 19, 2004, and September 2, 2004, and agreed to forward the proposed policies to the full School Board for approval. At their meeting on September 27, 2004, the School Board voted 7-0 to approve the proposed attached changes to Board Policy.

Attachments

Prepared by: Enid Hunter, Executive Director, Curriculum and Instruction

Approved by: Jan Christensen, Assistant Superintendent, Instruction

350 Recognition of Religious Beliefs and Customs

~~It is accepted that no religious or non-religious belief should be promoted by the District or its employees, and none should be disparaged. Instead, the District should encourage all students and staff members to appreciate and be tolerant of each other's religious views. The District should utilize its opportunity to foster understanding and mutual respect among students and parents, whether it involves race, culture, economic background or religious beliefs. In that spirit of tolerance, students should not be required to participate in activities which are contrary to their religious or non-religious beliefs.~~

~~The District recognizes that one of its educational goals is to advance the students' knowledge and appreciation of the role that religious heritage has played in the social, cultural and historical development of civilization.~~

~~350.1 Observance of Religious Holidays~~

~~The practice of the District shall be as follows:~~

~~a. The several holidays throughout the year which are celebrated religiously and also as a traditional secular holiday may be observed in District schools.~~

~~b. The historical and contemporary values and the origin of religious holidays may be explained in an unbiased and objective manner without sectarian indoctrination.~~

~~c. Music, art, literature and drama having religious themes or bases are permitted as a part of the curriculum for school-sponsored activities and programs if presented in a prudent and objective manner and as a traditional part of the cultural and religious heritage of the particular holiday.~~

~~d. The use of religious symbols (for example, a cross, menorah, crescent, Star of David, crèche, symbols of Native American religions or other symbols) that are a part of a religious holiday may be permitted as a teaching aid or resource provided such symbols are displayed as an example of the cultural and religious heritage of the holiday and are temporary in nature.~~

~~e. Students should not be graded on participation or nonparticipation in any of the above events.~~

~~(Section 349 – Approved June 16, 1986)~~

350 Addressing Religious Beliefs and Customs

The District is committed to a culturally responsive curriculum. As a public school system, we are required by the U.S. and Alaska Constitutions to maintain religious neutrality. The District should neither encourage, discourage, nor disparage religious beliefs or activity. The District should encourage all students and staff members to appreciate and be tolerant of each other's religious ties. The District should utilize its opportunity to foster understanding and mutual respect among students and parents, whether it involves race, culture, economic background or religious beliefs. In that spirit of tolerance, students should not be required to participate in activities that are contrary to their beliefs relating to religion.

The District recognizes that one of its educational goals is to advance the students' knowledge and understanding of the role that religious heritage has played in the social, cultural and historical development of civilization.

The goal of this policy is to foster respect for and understanding of the diverse religious and non-religious beliefs and practices of the people of the world. The public school is a meeting place for children of many backgrounds and beliefs. The District has an invaluable opportunity and duty to bring about knowledge, understanding, and mutual respect among those in its care.

350.1 Requirements

1. Educational Value

All classroom activities must be selected on the basis on their educational value and their alignment to the District's curricular standards. Holiday activities must be consistent with the academic goals of the classroom. Teachers should assume diversity exists among their students and should choose holiday activities designed to foster appreciation of diversity. If any chosen holiday has religious significance in some traditions, care should be taken to provide instruction about or activities relating to that holiday only if they are objective and religiously neutral. Religious symbols may be used in the classroom only within the context of studying the cultural and historical significance of the holiday or religious practices, and only for the duration of the study.

2. Religious Neutrality

A. Instruction and Activities

All instruction and District sponsored functions, including cultural experiences, events, and parties, must have a religiously neutral theme. The following principles should be utilized in determining if the activity is educationally appropriate and religiously neutral:

- 1) The activity should be selected on the basis of its educational value rather than religious context.
- 2) The traditions of different people should be shared and respected.
- 3) The event should neither promote nor inhibit religious views.
- 4) The activity should be sensitive to the various religious beliefs represented by the students and parents.

B. Staff and Volunteers

District employees and school volunteers may not inject personal religious beliefs into the classroom or activity or denigrate any religious belief or practice. District staff must refrain from expression of personal religious beliefs if the time, place, or manner suggests District endorsement or authority.

3. Religious Symbols

Religious symbols include objects used in the celebration of a religious holiday or observance of a religious belief. Some apparently secular objects have association with religious beliefs or holidays in certain contexts (e.g., candy canes, mistletoe). Though not religious in themselves, and not banned from the classroom, any use of such items should reflect a thoughtfulness and sensitivity that reflects ASD policy and guidance.

4. Diversity

District staff are permitted to teach about religious holiday and other occasions such as Christmas, Epiphany, Eid al-Fitr (Last Day of Ramadan), Vesak or Visakah Puja (Buddha Day), Passover and Diwali, without proselytizing, only if the instruction is reasonably related to District curriculum and reflects a balanced approach about diverse religions and religious practices around the world.

5. Concerts and Music

Concerts and music, including music during a religious holiday season, may include music associated with religious traditions so long as it is part of a variety of music that represents various religious and cultural traditions. Religious music may be performed but it must not dominate the program. A program including religious material (musical or otherwise) must emphasize the cultural, rather than the worshipful, aspects of a holiday.

6. Parental Discretion

Even when the theme of a musical or other program is consistent with neutrality standards, parents may request that their children be excused from attending or participating in holiday events. Those requests shall be granted and every attempt must be made to protect those children from embarrassment or peer pressure. Students shall not be graded on participation or non-participation in any of the above events.

Guidelines

As we approach the winter holiday season, please remember that the ASD serves a diverse population and takes pride in our sensitivity to the various cultures that live in our community. As a public school system we are required by the U.S. Constitution to maintain religious neutrality. We should neither encourage nor discourage religious activity.

Please follow these guidelines as you plan your school activities for the holiday season and throughout the rest of the year.

1. You are permitted to teach about religious holidays and other occasions such as Christmas, Epiphany, Eid al-Fitr (Last Day of Ramadan), Vesak or Visakah Puja (Buddha Day), Passover and Diwali, without proselytizing, only if you are teaching about diverse religions and religious practices around the world. You may not inject personal religious beliefs into the classroom or denigrate any religious belief or practice.
2. All cultural experiences, events and parties must have a religiously neutral theme. The following questions should assist you in determining if the activity is religiously neutral.
 - a. Is the activity selected on the basis of its educational value rather than its religious context?
 - b. Are the traditions of different people shared and respected?
 - c. Does the event neither promote nor inhibit religious views?
 - d. Is there sensitivity to the various religious beliefs represented by the students and parents?
3. Concerts and music, whether during the holidays or not, must present a variety of music that represents various religious and cultural traditions. Although some religious music can be performed, it must not dominate the program. The cultural, not the worshipful aspects of a holiday, must be emphasized during any program, whether musical or not.
4. Even when the theme of a musical or other program is consistent with neutrality standards, parents may request that their children be excused from attending or participating in holiday events. Those requests should be granted and every attempt should be made to protect those children from embarrassment or peer pressure.
5. Religious symbols, if used in a classroom, must only be used in the context of studying the cultural and historical significance of the holiday or religious practices, and only for the duration of the study.

These guidelines are an attempt to more clearly articulate current policy and offer you assistance in determining the appropriateness of your activities. Please remember, the primary focus in the month of December as in all months should remain linked to your curricular standards. Let's continue our work towards reaching the School Board's goals of improving achievement for all students and eliminating the achievement gap.