



## RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL DAYS OF SIGNIFICANCE IN SCHOOLS

Responsibility: *Superintendent, Student Achievement & Well-Being*

Legal References: *Education Act, Reg. 298 (S.28,29);  
Ontario Human Rights Code (2000);  
Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*

Related References: *Ontario Human Rights Code, 2000;  
Race, Religion and Culture In Ontario School Materials – 1980;  
Policy/Program Memorandum #112;  
Board Policy 1008 – Equity and Inclusion  
Board Policy 1012 – Faith and Religious Accommodations*

Revisions: *March 2016*

Reviewed: *March 2016*

### 1. Preamble

- 1.1. The procedure describes guidelines and expectations for recognizing religious and cultural days of significance in schools.
- 1.2 This procedure is intended to assist staff in planning for the observance of religious and cultural days of significance, and to reinforce the belief that programs should attempt to recognize the diversity of cultures represented in schools and the community.

### 2. Rationale

- 2.1 It is the intent of this guideline that:
  - 2.1.1 Staff is aware of expectations regarding the recognition of religious and cultural days of significance;
  - 2.1.2 School staff develop a yearly plan to recognize religious and cultural day of significance (e.g., which days of significance they intend to recognize, when they intend to recognize them, and the time and resources required);
  - 2.1.3 School staff may consult with the Learning Services Department to develop resources that make curricular connections to assist in the recognition of religious and cultural days of significance;
  - 2.1.4 A plan for recognizing religious and cultural days of significance involves a reasonable level of effort, and resource commitment, and does not place undue hardship on staff or a school;
  - 2.1.5 A plan for recognizing religious and cultural days of significance involves appropriate consultation and communication with the community.

### 3. Philosophy

- 3.1 The public school system should reflect the pluralistic nature of society and recognize and celebrate cultural diversity.
- 3.2 The recognition and celebration of religious and cultural days of significance is one way of reflecting the cultural diversity in society and is an expectation of a public school system that strives to serve groups and individuals in a fair and equitable manner.

- 3.3 Recognizing and celebrating religious and cultural days of significance demonstrates support for the fundamental freedom expressed in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms - Freedom of Conscience and Religion. This includes.
  - 3.3.1 The following fundamental freedoms:
    - 3.3.1.1 Freedom of conscience and religion;
    - 3.3.1.2 Freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication;
    - 3.3.1.3 Freedom of peaceful assembly; and
    - 3.3.1.4 Freedom of association.
  - 3.3.2 This reinforces statements expressed in the Ministry of Education document, Race, Religion and Culture in Ontario School Materials – 1980 including:
    - 3.3.2.1 Minority cultures should be represented as being an integral part of Canadian society, as well as being cultures in their own right.
  - 3.3.3 A responsibility of teachers, principals, superintendents and trustees is to work towards providing an environment in which every student feels welcome. This includes students having an opportunity to participate in school without fear, segregation or pressure to conform or change their religious beliefs and practices and benefiting from an understanding of the beliefs and practices of others in our society. “Awareness of personal responsibility in society grows out of knowledge and understanding on one’s community, one’s country, and the rest of the world. It is based on an understanding of social order, a respect for the law and the rights of others, and a concern for the quality of life at home and abroad.”
- 3.4 The Waterloo Region District School Board strives to ensure that one religion does not have primacy over all others as a demonstration of respect for the diversity of customs and beliefs of students and staff.
- 3.5 The celebration of holy days and other days of significance such as Christmas and Hanukkah are permissible, and schools may recognize and celebrate various religious activities and events. Such celebrations require advance planning at the school level to ensure that activities, such as Christmas concerts, are not perceived to force inclusion or be exclusionary and are balanced with recognition of other religious events.
- 3.6 Inclusion, in the context of an educational system, means the development of events and programs that are planned in such a way that they enable people from a diversity of customs to make decisions without jeopardizing their integrity or becoming involved in something which is contrary to their beliefs.
- 3.7 Exclusion means the development of events and programs that are planned in such a way that a student or staff member feels unable to participate because they perceive such experiences to be in opposition to their normal beliefs or practices. Sensitivity in planning and organizing religious activities is important.

#### **4. Expectations**

- 4.1 School staff, with leadership by the Principal, is strongly encouraged to initiate discussions with their school communities to establish a mutually satisfactory understanding of plans for recognizing days of significance and/or curriculum connections.
- 4.2 Days of significance, when selected for recognition, should attempt to be inclusive. Hollow symbols and tokenism are to be avoided. School recognitions should seek to promote awareness and understanding and avoid trivializing or marginalizing others experiences.

Resources and curriculum connections should support teachers who are attempting to work with students and families in the recognition of days of significance. Programs and curriculum initiatives, announcements and notices should contribute to awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity. The concept of inclusion underlies the Waterloo Region District School Board’s

Anti-Discrimination and Anti-Harassment Policy (P 1004), Equity and Inclusion Policy (P 1008) and Faith and Religious Accommodations Policy (P1012). Resources or curriculum connections should be inclusive and universal and must not be construed as indoctrinational.

- 4.3 There is a need to acknowledge a variety of different religions. This includes recognition of groups represented in Canadian society, but not necessarily within the specific school population. "The intent of addressing equity within the curriculum is to work toward including in the school environment and instructional practices, the content that reflects the diverse and pluralistic nature of our society...and secondly to include the perspectives, experiences and contributions of everyone, thereby recognizing the intrinsic value and significance of all groups in our society"
- 4.4 A yearly school plan that recognizes religious and cultural days of significance should be considered by teachers/staff as they develop their long-range plans.
- 4.5 Curriculum related courses that teach about religion are acceptable within specified parameters. The expectations of the Ontario Court of Appeal leading to the eventual amendment of Regulation 298 are stated succinctly in Policy/Program Memorandum #112. These include:
  - 4.5.1 The school may sponsor the study of religion, but may not sponsor the practice of religion.
  - 4.5.2 The school may expose students to all religious views, but may not impose any particular view.
  - 4.5.3 The school's approach to religion is one of instruction, not one of indoctrination.
  - 4.5.4 The function of the school is to educate about all religions, not to convert to any one religion.
  - 4.5.5 The schools' approach is academic, not devotional.
  - 4.5.6 The school should study what all people believe, but should not teach a student what to believe.
  - 4.5.7 The school should strive for student awareness of all religions, but should not press for student acceptance of any one religion.
  - 4.5.8 The school should seek to inform the student about various beliefs, but should not seek to have them conform to any one belief.
- 4.6 Present educational legislation permits exemption from the teaching of religious education.
  - 4.6.1 The Waterloo Region District School Board has exercised this option and does not have religious education classes in the elementary panel. At the secondary level course such as World Religions are offered. Opening exercises that reflect the diversity of beliefs and faiths to be found in the province are acceptable as long as no one religion is given primacy.

## **5. Student and Community Use of School Facilities for Religious Purposes**

Presently there are groups who utilize school facilities for religious clubs and activities. Since no community sponsored religious indoctrination classes can be held during the school day, these activities must take place before or after the official school day. School facilities can be rented to students for these purposes in the same way as they are rented to the public. Schools can communicate religious information provided it is not promotional or indoctrinational. Promotional information may be communicated before or after the school day and students can only accept promotional materials when the school has received formal written approval from the parents or guardians. It must be noted, however, that students required to practice the dictates of their religion should be given reasonable accommodation and supervision in an appropriate location (e.g., private prayer area).

## **6. Events with Religious Connections (e.g., Christmas Concerts)**

- 6.1 Any celebration that takes months of planning and is focused exclusively on the beliefs of one religious group is contrary to the tenets of inclusion as specified by the Ministry of Education and the Board.

- 6.2 Schools must be aware of the amount of and exercise discretion in the time devoted to a celebratory activity with religious connections particularly where it involves students being removed from classroom programs or the commitment of significant resources and time.
- 6.3 School staff should assess whether an event is inclusive or exclusionary to the student body as a whole, and the significance of the location. The use of religious facilities such as synagogues or mosques for school events or churches for Christmas concerts is typically not advisable or appropriate.
- 6.4 Schools should endeavor to plan events to meet the needs of their community and to minimize the possibility of religious primacy for one group. For example, a school that has a Christmas concert with largely Christian content should also recognize other holy days or days of significance and demonstrate their commitment to the spirit of inclusion through their planning and effort. It should be understood that in planning an activity based largely on a tradition significant to one part of the community, such as Christmas, the inclusion of a small recognition of another group's customs in an attempt to include that group, might be seen by them as tokenism. A review of the religious days of significance that might be celebrated each month by all faiths and cultures would be a good starting point for such planning.

## 7. Ideas and Suggestions

### 7.1 Days of Significance –Recognitions

In many educational programs, days of significance become a focal point for themes and activities that may have potential curriculum connections such as Thanksgiving, Halloween, Christmas, Valentine's Day and Easter. Some curriculum guides and commercial educational supplies make teaching days of significance convenient by packaging commercial sets of activities and materials. The media also become very involved in promoting days of significance such as Christmas. Overuse or reliance on commercial products or curriculum connections to exclusive religious days of significance may interfere with a developmental approach to address the needs of specific groups of children.

Staff is encouraged to reflect on questions such as, "What is the curriculum focus in activities associated with days of significance?" "What is the intended learning for students?" "Does the purpose of such activities promote inclusion, awareness and appreciation for cultural diversity?"

Used thoughtfully, purposefully and in a planned fashion, activities associated with days of significance can contribute to growth, learning and understanding related to curriculum expectations. They may be fun, engaging and build a sense of group affiliation while appreciating cultural diversity.

- 7.2 Guidelines for utilizing religious and cultural days of significance in addressing curricular and co-curricular goals include:
  - 7.2.1 Consider using activities related to days of significance as part of many other kinds of activities about a cultural group such as their values, traditions and customs. Ask yourself: What is the purpose of teaching about this day? Is it developmentally suitable to my group of students? Is it related to their lives? If not, why am I teaching it?
  - 7.2.2 Establish the distinction between learning about another person's traditions and celebrating one's own days of significance. Invite children to participate as "guests" in activities not typical of their culture. Encourage the children for whom the activities are significant to share feelings as well as information.
  - 7.2.3 Avoid treating some days of significance as "exotic" and others as "regular". Everyone belongs to an ethnic group. Therefore, all traditions come from specific ethnocultural roots.
  - 7.2.4 Do not assume everyone from the same ethnic group celebrates in the same way. When integrating days of significance with lessons, try to include as much of the diversity of expression as possible.
  - 7.2.5 Demonstrate respect for everyone's traditions throughout the curriculum.

- 7.2.6 Plan strategies for working with the children whose families' beliefs do not permit participation in certain kinds of celebrations. Include the child's parents or guardians in creating satisfactory alternatives for the child within the school.
- 7.2.7 Be sensitive to the possibility that families with very low incomes may find times associated with seasonal celebrations as stressful as a result of commercialization and media pressure. The promotion of Halloween costumes and the commercial equation of love with expensive and numerous gifts at Christmas time are prominent examples. Also, special seasons like Christmas can cause loneliness and despair for some families.
- 7.2.8 In the classroom, challenge thinking by focusing on meaningful ways to celebrate without spending a great amount of money. Emphasize that homemade costumes and gifts are very special because they are unique. Talk about the underlying meaning of days of significance as times when family and others come together. Use the connection of the media and commercial enterprises with cultural or religious days of significance to think critically about the intent or original purpose of such days.

### 7.3 Christmas

Although the Christmas period is celebrated nationally, it really reflects a specific religious tradition and belief. For children who are non Christian (e.g., Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim, atheist, etc.) the exclusive focus on Christmas can be viewed as isolating or disconnected from their experience. Addressing the dual reality of Christmas as a Christian holy day and a national holiday can be helpful as a critical thinking activity. Some suggestions include:

- 7.3.1 Be aware of the amount of classroom time devoted to Christmas activities.
- 7.3.2 Plan to hold celebrations in a neutral place - not in a specifically religious facility such as a church.
- 7.3.3 Recognize that there are December holidays other than Christmas, for example, Hanukkah, the North American Native tradition of celebrating the Winter Solstice, and sometimes Divali, a Hindu celebration.
- 7.3.4 Involve the community and parents in planning special activities and events that celebrate a diversity of perspectives and experiences about seasonal religious and cultural days of significance, which may include Christmas.