

RECOGNITION OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS, CUSTOMS, AND HOLIDAYS

I. PURPOSE

To establish guidelines for recognition of religious beliefs, customs, and holidays.

II. SCOPE

This policy applies to all schools and all students and employees within the Shelby County Schools.

III. POLICY STATEMENT

No religious belief or nonbelief shall be belittled by the school system or its employees, and none shall be promoted. The school system shall foster understanding and mutual respect among students and parents, whether it involves race, culture, economic background or religious beliefs.¹ Students and staff members shall be excused from participating in practices which are contrary to their religious beliefs.

Religious Holidays

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 observances by students.⁴

Observance of religious holidays² shall be as follows:

1. The several holidays throughout the year which have both a religious and a secular basis may be observed in the public schools with sensitivity to the various religions;³

2. The historical and contemporary values and the origin of religious holidays may 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 in a prudent and objective manner and as a traditional part of the cultural and religious heritage of the particular holiday;
4. The use of religious symbols that are part of a religious holiday are 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; and
5. The school district's calendar shall be prepared so as to minimize conflicts with religious holidays of all faiths.
6. The district may educate students about the history of traditional winter celebrations and allow students and district staff to offer traditional greetings regarding the celebrations, including, but not limited to: (1) "Merry Christmas"; (2) "Happy Hanukkah"; and (3) "Happy holidays". Additionally, in compliance with the restrictions in state law, the district may display on school property scenes or symbols associated with traditional winter celebrations, including a menorah or a Christmas image such as a nativity scene or Christmas tree, if the display includes a scene or symbol of: (1) More than one (1) religion; or (2) One (1) religion and at least one (1) secular scene or symbol. However, a display relating to a traditional winter celebration may not include a message that encourages adherence to a particular religious belief.⁵

In addition to observance of religious holidays, student absences from school for religious holidays may be considered excused in accordance with the applicable provisions of policy 6014 Attendance and Excuses.

IV. RESPONSIBILITY

- A. The principal is responsible for ensuring that this policy is administered at his/her school.
- B. The Superintendent is responsible for ensuring that this policy is followed.

Legal References:

1. TCA 49-6-2901-2906; State Board of Education Guidelines-Recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance
2. *Florey v. Sioux Falls*, 619 F. 2d 1311 (1980); *Washegesic v. Bloomindale Public Schools* 813 F. Supp. 559 (1993)
3. TCA 49-6-3016
4. Presidential Guidance-Religious Expression in Public Schools
5. Public Chapter 687

Cross References:

1. 6014 Attendance and Excuses