IMD - Religious Expression in the Schools

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Provisions of both the United States and Maine constitutions bar government involvement, in any form, which has the direct effect of promoting religious purposes. At the same time, MSAD # 35 realizes that students have a right to personal beliefs, and this right does not end at the schoolhouse door. School must be a place where personal beliefs are treated with fairness and respect.

The Board recognizes that a student's education would be incomplete without an understanding of the role of personal beliefs in school ceremonies and observances in history and culture. The district shares responsibility with the community to develop in its students appropriate moral and ethical character incorporating ideals of liberty, justice, the pursuit of happiness, and equality of opportunity.

Religious expression in public schools involves a careful balancing of free speech rights, personal expression and the right to free exercise of religion without promoting or establishing religion.

Student Prayer and Religious Discussion in General

- Students have the same right to engage in individual or group prayer and religious discussion during the school day as they do to engage in other comparable activities.
- Students may pray in a non-disruptive manner when not engaged in school activities or instruction and subject to the rules that normally apply in school.
- Students also may participate in before-or after-school events with religious content. School officials may neither discourage nor encourage participation in such events.
- The right to engage in voluntary prayer or religious discussion free from discrimination does not include the right to have a captive audience listen or compel other students to participate.

School Staff Neutrality Regarding Religious Activity

School staff members, when acting in their official capacity, are prohibited from endorsing, soliciting, encouraging, participating, or directing religious activities with students, on campus or at school-sponsored off-campus events.

Teaching about Religion

- Schools may teach about the history of religion, comparative religion, the Bible, the Koran or other religious scripture-as-literature, and the role of religion in the history of the United States and other countries.

- Instruction about religion must be secular (such as in the context of history or comparative religions), and must not favor, promote, or demean the beliefs or customs of any particular religion or sect.

Freedom of Expression or Activity by Non-Students

Schools may not permit undue influence proselytization, religious recruitment, or demonstration involving preference of one belief over another by non-students on school premises during school hours or during off-campus, school-sponsored events.

Student Expression through Dress

Students may display religious messages on items of clothing to the same extent that they are permitted to display other comparable messages. When wearing particular attire, such as yarmulkes and head scarves, during the school day as part of a student's religious practice, schools generally may not prohibit the wearing of such items unless the item poses a safety risk.

Student Expression through School Productions and Displays

For both class and extracurricular purposes, students regularly produce drama and other theatrical events. Whether produced as part of a class activity (such as a drama class or as a school-sponsored club), the production is a school-sponsored event or activity over which the school retains control and responsibility.

As with instruction, the history of religion, comparative religion, the Bible (or other scripture)-as-literature, and the role of religion in the history of the United States and other countries all are permissible elements in theatrical production. Concerts may appropriately include music related to religious themes.

Schools may display religious symbols on a temporary basis, and may be combined with examples of the practice of other religions as a multicultural display or for some other education purpose.

School Publications

Students have the right to express their individual views, including religious views, in official school publications such as a school newspaper or yearbook in a manner that maintains this orderly operation of the school.

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