

Teachers Know The Law,



Do You?

A Parent's Guide to Religion
in the Public Schools

Your Child and his personal beliefs are protected within the public school system under the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, which states that, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

This booklet includes information from The First Amendment Center and the American Civil Liberties Union, as well as frequently asked questions by parents, students, and educators about how religion relates to their public school system.



1) Are teachers allowed to teach about religion?

Yes. The U.S. Supreme court has indicated that education in the public school system can include the study of religion as part of the curriculum and teachers are permitted to teach it in their classrooms.

Religion is essential to your child's understanding of our nation and of the world.

2) How do teachers teach about Religion? Can they invite guest speakers or use a text book?

Your child's teacher should teach about religion in an *academic*, not devotional, way. She strives to make her students *aware* of different religions, but she should never expect them to accept these religions or change their personal beliefs. Your child's public school system sponsors study, exposure, education, and information *about* religion. In no way does the school wish to promote, practice, or conform your child to any religion. You should expect to see heavy discussion about religion in your child *textbooks*, especially those of history. Your child may have a *guest speaker* in class that discusses religion. This is *okay* as long as the presentation remains purely academic.



3) Which religions should teachers teach about?

The answer of *which religions* to teach and how much should be taught about them is determined by grade level. As an elementary student, you should expect your child to be *introduced* to the basic ideas and practices of all the major religions of the world as they discuss family, community, culture, and the world's nations.

Religion & Character Education?

Your child's teacher can neither **instill** nor **inhibit** any religion. It is expected that your child learn personal virtues widely held in society like *honesty*, *integrity*, and *fairness*, but the teacher should not invoke religion in teaching so.

Who Can Pray & Where?

	Athletic Events	Assemblies	In the Classroom	Graduation Ceremonies	Baccalaureate Services
Students	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Teachers	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Coaches	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Administrators	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗

This table expresses the laws that various court cases have put into place. Many court cases in the past have ruled that prayer lead by any teacher or other school official on public school grounds or at a school-sponsored event is **unconstitutional** even if it is **not mandatory** and **student participation is voluntary**.

Your child retains the right under the Establishment Clause “to pray individually or in groups or to discuss their religious views with their peers so long as they are not disruptive.” Students may also express their beliefs in the form of homework, artwork, or any other assignments based on the religious content of their submissions. Teachers are to judge this work by *normal* academic standards.

4) Would a moment of silence be allowed at any of the events mentioned in the table above?

Yes. A moment of silence at any of these events does not violate the Establishment Clause as long as the school lets the students know that they may use the moment of silence as they wish, whether is it by silently reflecting, meditating, or praying.

5) What about the Pledge of Allegiance? Doesn't it mention God?

Your child is **not required** to stand, salute the flag, or recite the Pledge of Allegiance. Under The Constitution, your child's recitation of the pledge must be voluntary.





6) Is my child allowed to participate in religious organizations affiliated with the school?

Yes. Under the Equal Access Act, religious clubs may hold meetings on public high school grounds. Other organized events such as “See You at the Pole” meetings are allowed as well, but there are conditions. A teacher or other school official may *never* direct, conduct, or participate in the activities during these meetings. The only role of any school staff is to maintain a safe and orderly environment for your child.

7) What if my child asks his teacher about her personal beliefs?

The teacher must take into account the age of your child. She may answer with a short statement on her personal beliefs, or she may not answer at all.

8) Will my child have to participate in holiday parties that celebrate specific religions?

Any holiday celebration should accommodate the diverse religions of the students. For example, a Christmas tree would be alright to display, as it has gained secular status in our society. However, a nativity scene or a cross, which is a religious symbol of the holiday, would not be permitted to be displayed in the school.

9) Is distribution of Gideon Bibles allowed at my child’s school?

No. Under the Establishment Clause, the Gideon Society’s practice of handing out Bibles to public school students is unconstitutional.





Your Child and his personal beliefs deserve to be respected

within the public school. While it is important that his beliefs are treated with care, it is also important that he is educated about religions from around the world. The history of civilization is rich with religion, and in order to create scholarly, well-rounded students, we must make them aware of these religions and its relevance to our society today.

If you or your child ever feel that any of these rights or laws are violated, talk with the school principal or any other authoritative figure at school.

All information provided by The First Amendment Center and ACLU

FIRST AMENDMENT CENTER
firstamendmentcenter.org

