

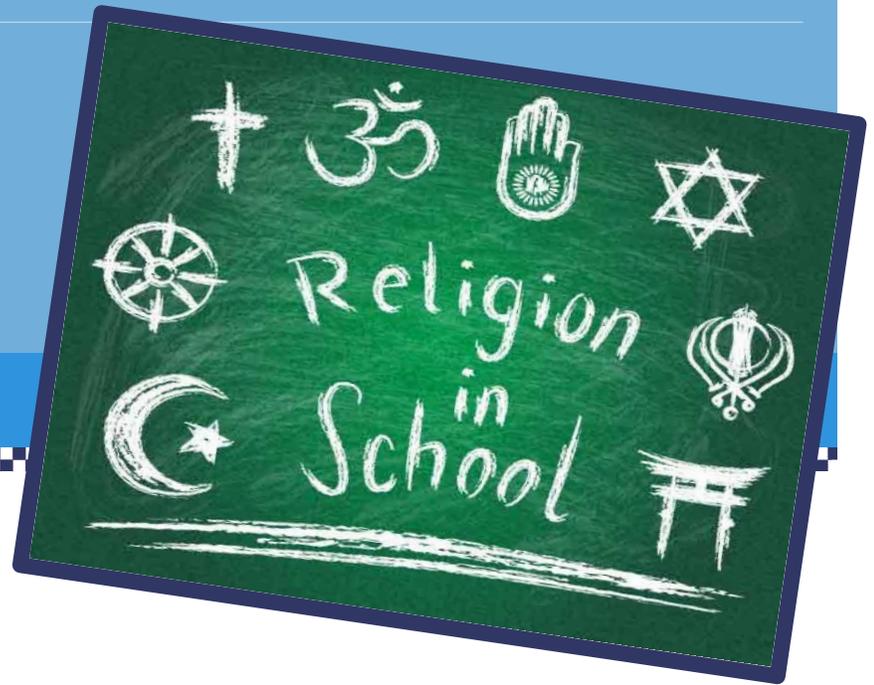
The Truth About Religion in Public Schools

The American Classroom
Publications

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All information is provided by the American
Civil Liberties Union of Tennessee and The
First Amendment Center.

October 4, 2014



Included:

- Questions regarding prayer
- Teaching about religion
- Student's rights
- Teacher's rights
- Other frequently asked questions concerning religion in the public school setting

Important Information

The debate regarding religion's place in public schools is by far a new issue. These problems have perplexed our schools and communities for years. As an educator, it is of utmost importance to know and understand the laws concerning religion in public school systems. Throughout this presentation you will find the most current information to help you in this endeavor.

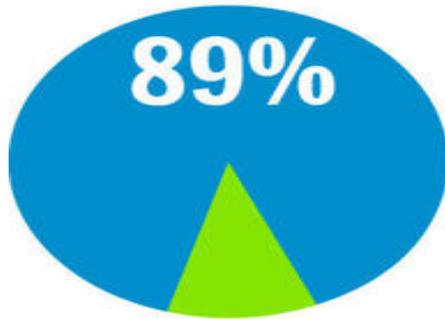
Coexist

“The First Amendment's Religion Clauses mean that religious beliefs and expression are too precious to be either proscribed or prescribed by the State. The responsibility and choice is committed to the private sphere, which itself is promised freedom to pursue that mission.” Therefore the First Amendment applies to public schools with regulations.

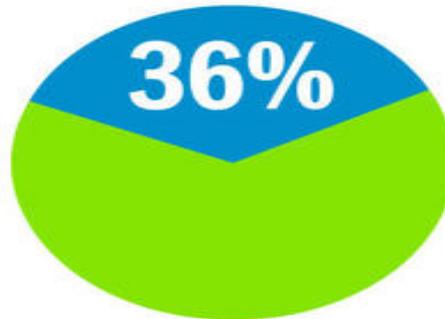
Teaching about religion in schools

PERCENTAGE WHO KNOW PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS...

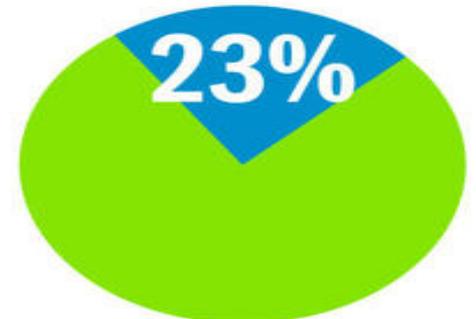
CANNOT lead class in prayer



CAN offer comparative religion course



CAN read from Bible as example of literature



SOURCE: Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2010

DESERET NEWS GRAPHIC

Did you know...

#1

The Supreme Court has ruled

that public school education may include teaching *about* religion. Teachers may not promote religion in any way, but it is constitutional to teach objectively about religion.

#2

The National School Board Association

and other major educational organizations believe religion *should* be taught in public schools. Why? Religion plays a significant role in history and society. Understanding different religions is essential to understanding the world and our nation.

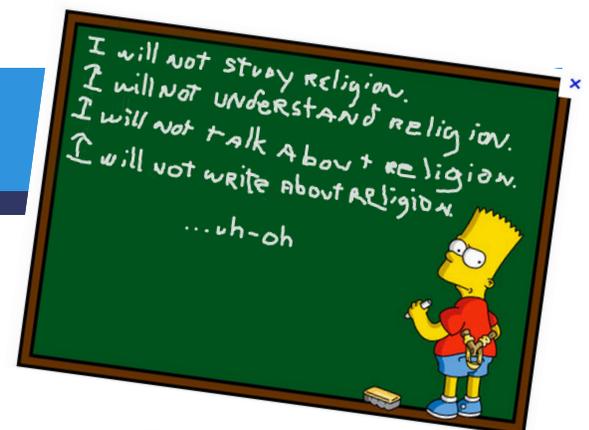
#3

What and how much you teach

about religion can vary. Decisions about which religions to include and how much to discuss about each religion are to be determined by the grade level of the students and the academic requirements of the course being taught.

How to teach about religion:

- Your approach should be *academic* not *devotional*.
- Strive for student *awareness* of religions, but do not press for student *acceptance* of any religion.
- Sponsor study *about* religion, not the practice of religion.
- Lessons may *expose* students to a diversity of religious views, but may not *impose* any particular view.
- The school educates *about* all religions; it does not promote or denigrate religion.



Q&A Regarding Prayer in Schools

There are many misunderstood notions about prayer in schools. In this question and answer format, you will find the truth regarding prayer in public schools, as well as, your responsibility as an educator to understand these uncertainties.



Is prayer in the classroom constitutional? What about assemblies?

- The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment prohibits school-sponsored prayer or religious indoctrination in the classroom or at school assemblies.

Can there be a prayer at athletic events?

- Because athletic events are also sponsored by the school and host a multitude of people (with religious differences), it is unconstitutional to have prayer at athletic events.



Is prayer at graduation allowed?

- Because attendance to high school graduation ceremonies is typically obligatory- and in a sense, a conclusion to curriculum- the inclusion of a religious program in graduation ceremonies violates the Establishment Clause and is therefore not allowed.

Then can there be prayer at Baccalaureate services?

- Under certain conditions Baccalaureate services are allowable. However, it is crucial that the event is student led, entirely voluntary, held separately from graduation services, and neither sponsored or supervised by school officials.

Can teachers pray or otherwise practice their faith while at school?

- Teachers do not have the right to pray with or in the presence of students during the school day. If teachers wish to pray in their free time, without the presence of students, they may do so. Otherwise, it is not allowable to practice your faith in the presence of students at school.

May students pray while in school?

- Students have the right 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 say grace before meals and pray before tests, again, as long as they do so in an undistruptive way.

What About This...



“See You at the Pole” events are permissible only under certain conditions.

- Outside people may not direct, conduct, control, or regularly attend the activities of such student groups.
- Schools may not avoid the ban against school-sponsored prayer by initiating an event and then delegating the responsibilities to a student, or by obtaining “permission” from parents.
- Schools may not advertise or promote the events within the school either verbally or in writing.

Or this?

Again, under specific conditions, schools may allow a moment of silence.

- The moment of silence must be free from any direction by school officials.
- There cannot be a state coercion or element of preference during the moment of silence for a particular religion or for religion in general.
- Students must be left to meditate, reflect, or pray silently as they see fit.
- In short, if the school tells the students they may use the moment of silence however they wish, the activity does not violate the Constitution.



Students' Rights



The Pledge of Allegiance

Students' recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance must be voluntary. They may also choose not to recite the Pledge without parental consent.

Equal Access Act & Student Religious Clubs

Religious clubs may hold meetings on public high school grounds in unity with the Federal Equal Access Act as long as other similar non-curriculum related student groups are allowed to meet during the non-instructional time; the club does not interfere with regular educational activities; and the school does not initiate, direct, sponsor, or participate in, or promote during instructional time. Additionally, while faculty is commonly required to be present during the meetings, their role should be restricted to a custodial, non-participatory role.



Because the Establishment Clause does not apply to purely private speech, students enjoy the right to read their Bibles or other scripture, say grace before meals, pray before tests, and discuss religion with other willing student listeners. However, the right does not include, for example, the right to have a captive audience listen or compel other students to participate.



Students may express their beliefs about religion in the form of homework, artwork, and other written and oral assignments free from discrimination based on the religious content of their submissions.

Do holiday celebrations violate the laws pertaining to religion in public schools?

Students cannot be forced to participate in any event that offends his or her beliefs, and school officials should make every effort to accommodate diverse faiths during the holiday season by including their customs, songs, and traditional foods at parties and other in-school events. Schools are encouraged to focus on representing elements of the holiday that have obtained secular status in our society. These may include: snowmen, Easter eggs, Santa Clause, Christmas trees, etc.



Distribution of Gideon Bibles

Bibles cannot be distributed to students or left in classrooms for students to take. These acts would cause reasonable belief that the school endorses the program and thus is unconstitutional. Gideon Bible can be distributed off of school grounds, but never on school property.



GUEST SPEAKERS

If a guest speaker is invited, care should be taken to find someone with an academic background necessary for an objective and scholarly discussion of the historical period and the religion being considered. Be certain that any guest speaker understands the First Amendment guidelines for teaching *about* religion in public schools and is clear about the academic nature of the assignment.