

Teaching About Religion I-6

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution states that “Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion...” This principle is reflected in the fact that no public schools may engage in the practice of religion. However, the United States Supreme Court has stated (*Abington v. Schempp* and *Murray v. Curlett*) “that education without the study of religion is incomplete and that such study is not prohibited by the First Amendment.”

The following statements, which are essentially the Court’s decision as to what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate study of religion in the schools, are also statements of policy of the Mountain Brook Board of Education regarding the study of religion.

1. The school may sponsor the *study* of religion, but should not sponsor the *practice* of religion. The teaching of religion should be germane to the study of a particular geographical region or country, or conducted within the context of courses such as philosophy, history, or sociology.
2. The school may *expose* students to a variety of religious views, but should not *impose* any particular view.
3. The school’s approach to religion is one of *instruction*, not one of *indoctrination*.
4. The function of the school is to *educate* about religions, not to *convert* to any one religion.
5. The school’s approach to religion is *academic*, not *devotional*.
6. The school may teach about different beliefs, but should not teach a student what he or she should believe.
7. The school may strive for student *awareness* of various religions, but should not press for student *acceptance* of any one religion.
8. The school may seek to *inform* the student about various beliefs, but should not seek to *conform* him or her to any one belief.

Application of Board Policies Concerning the Teaching of Religion

Defining Religious Content: It is the policy of the Mountain Brook Board of Education that religious concepts can and may be studied in the schools within appropriate contexts, but that it is not permissible for the schools to attempt to indoctrinate students with any religious point of view.

In most instances, religious subject matter is readily identifiable by educators; however, there are areas of study or counseling techniques which appear to have only secular significance but which may in fact have important religious connotations to the community.

It is the Board's policy that no student shall be required or persuaded to participate in any activity that the student (or his or her parent or guardian) perceives to be in conflict with his or her moral, ethical, or religious beliefs.

It has come to the attention of the Board of Education that certain relaxation and imaging techniques, which have occasionally been taught or recommended in the Mountain Brook schools, may be perceived to be intrinsically religious in nature. These techniques may be briefly described as follows:

- 1) **Progressive Relaxation:** This activity involves the serial relaxation of the major muscles of the body. Such relaxation may be brought about by conscious intent through directions by a narrator and may also involve a process of first tensing then relaxing major muscle groups in a prescribed order (e.g., from feet to head). The activity may be accompanied by music which is selected to be soothing or restful.
- 2) **Guided Imagery:** This activity involves the use of images communicated to the listener by narration while he or she is in a deeply relaxed state, hypnotic state, or altered state of consciousness.
- 3) **Deep Breathing:** This activity encourages students to breathe regularly and naturally being aware of the diaphragm and lungs. Students may be encouraged to use imagery during the exercise (for example, visualizing tension going out and relaxation going in).
- 4) **Meditation:** For the present purpose, the term "meditation" is defined as any activity which involves repeated exposure to any sensory stimuli, including words, or sounds, for the purpose of inducing a relaxed or altered mental state.

Practice or Indoctrination: It is the Board's position that activities described in Sections 1 through 4 above, may be interpreted as religious activities and should therefore be subject to Board policies which prohibit the practice of religion in the school or the religious indoctrination of students in the

school. Therefore, students in the Mountain Brook schools should not be requested, encouraged, or invited to participate in techniques such as progressive relaxation, guided imagery, deep breathing, meditation or any similar or related activity.

Academic Discussion: In accordance with Board policy, school professional personnel may conduct *discussion* about religious concepts, practices, and disciplines provided that such discussion is part of an inclusive study of religion or germane to the study of a particular region or country. Board policy also requires that such discussion be objective, academic, and informational, and that the leader of the discussion does not advocate any particular form of religious practice.

Parent Concerns: Since this school system wishes to remain sensitive to the concerns and suggestions of parents regarding religious issues and since parents have the primary responsibility for directing the education of their children consistent with their religious convictions, it is important that lines of communication be established and that parents be made aware of the means for such communication.

Therefore, the elementary, Junior High School, and High School academics committees will henceforth serve as vehicles for communicating parents' concerns regarding religious issues. Parents wishing to contact one of the academic committees for this purpose may follow regular procedures which include submitting a signed letter to a committee representative. The committee will have the option of inviting further input from community members concerning the issue, after which the recommendations of the committee will be made available to the Superintendent.

In the schools' yearly parent orientations to the academics committees, parents will be made aware of this additional function of the committees.

Parent Information: The Board of Education believes that parents should be kept informed of the content of elementary counseling programs and 7th, 8th, and 9th grade health programs. This information will permit parents to discuss topics and issues with their children at home on days when they are being presented in school. Knowledge of the programs will also allow parents to make informed decisions regarding their children's participation in all aspects of the programs.

At points throughout the school year to be determined by the elementary counselors and the 7th, 8th, and 9th grade health teachers, parents will be invited to attend orientation meetings. The purpose of these meetings will be to acquaint parents with the counseling or health programs. Parents will be informed regarding the topics covered and the dates when they will be introduced in the classroom. During these meetings, parents will also be given the

opportunity to inspect any related instructional materials which will be used by the students.

Adopted: June 11, 1990