

# Religious Diversity in Schools

## Addressing the Issues

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As the following vignettes indicate, today's schools are made up of diverse groups of students including those from a variety of religious and spiritual backgrounds (Green & Oldendorf, 2005). The situations and persons depicted are fictional.

- Every year Yousef, a second language learner, looks forward to the prayer, family time, and feasting of Eid al-Fitr, following the month-long observance of Ramadan. But this year, his science midterm exam and another major assignment in his English class were scheduled on the Eid al-Fitr holiday.
- Ms. Taylor, a coteacher, had just been appointed as a member of her school's Diversity Committee. The school's population had become increasingly diverse, including students who are Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, and Protestant. As part of its examination of the ways to represent all religions fairly and accurately in the curriculum and school programs, the committee was having a heated discussion about the celebration of holidays.
- Ms. Ramirez's inclusion class includes two students who are Jehovah's Witnesses, who must be excused from saying the Pledge of Allegiance. These students' families contacted Ms. Ramirez because they were concerned that others were questioning their children's patriotism, as they are the only ones in the class who do not say the pledge.
- Mr. George, a special education teacher, was shocked and disappointed by some of his students' insensitive behavior outside of his classroom. While supervising students in the hallways, he heard students making fun of Andrew, a student who wears a yarmulke, and making disparaging remarks about Bella, a student who wears a large cross.

Not all teachers are in agreement about how these beliefs and practices should be addressed. Students feel safe and are better able to learn when issues of diversity are handled with sensitivity. This article provides guidelines and strategies for helping educators and students understand, accept, and value religious and spiritual diversity.

### Understanding Legal Mandates and Legislative Policies

Many educators are reluctant to address their students' religious diversity because they are unaware of the legal mandates and legislative policies regarding religious diversity and schools. The First Amendment, which contains the Establishment and Free Exercise clauses, addresses religion and the schools. The Establishment Clause requires that states remain neutral among religions and between religion and nonreligion (Nord & Haynes, 1998). The Free Exercise Clause ensures that governmental agencies such as public schools do not restrict religious freedoms.

The Establishment and Free Exercise clauses have been interpreted by the courts in several important cases that address religious diversity in schools (Haynes, Chaltain, Ferguson, Hudson, & Thomas, 2003; Haynes & Thomas, 2001; Nord & Haynes, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 2003; Zirkel, 2002; see Table 1). Additional information regarding these decisions is available from the U.S. Department of Education ([www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/religionandschools/prayer\\_guidance.html](http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/religionandschools/prayer_guidance.html)) and the First Amendment Center ([www.firstamendmentcenter.org/default.aspx](http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/default.aspx)).

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**TABLE 1**  
**Legal Interpretations Regarding Issues of Education and Religion**

Legal Interpretations	Supporting Cases
<b>Curriculum:</b> Schools can teach about religion but cannot teach religion.	<i>Everson v. Board of Education</i> (1947); <i>Abington School District v. Schempp</i> (1963); <i>Epperson v. Arkansas</i> (1968)
<b>Neutrality:</b> Schools must maintain neutrality toward religious activity and cannot require, organize, endorse, encourage, or sanction student religious or antireligious behaviors (e.g., official prayers for students).	<i>Lee v. Weisman</i> (1992); <i>Good News Club v. Milford Central School</i> (2001)
<b>Student rights:</b> Students are permitted to engage in individual- and group-based religious acts as long as they are not disruptive. Students can present their beliefs about religion in their assignments and artwork and these products should be evaluated based on accepted academic standards and pedagogical concerns. Schools can adopt policies concerning student dress. However, these policies cannot single out religious clothing in general, the garb associated with a specific religion, or the wearing and displaying of religious messages on clothing. Schools may excuse students from instructional activities that are viewed as objectionable by students and their families based on their religious beliefs or other conscientious grounds, although students generally do not have a federal right to be excused from lessons that may be inconsistent with their religious beliefs.	<i>Tinker v. Des Moines Independent School District</i> (1969); <i>Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe</i> (2000); <i>Good News Club v. Milford Central Schools</i> (2001)
<b>Pledge of Allegiance:</b> Schools cannot require students to say the Pledge of Allegiance if it violates their religious beliefs.	<i>West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette</i> (1943)
<b>Holidays:</b> Schools can teach about the religious aspects of holidays and celebrate secular aspects of holidays. However, schools cannot celebrate holidays as religious events and take actions to encourage or discourage observance by students.	<i>Engel v. Vitale</i> (1962); <i>Florey v. Sioux Falls School District</i> (1980)
<b>Distribution of religious literature:</b> Schools can regulate the time, place and manner of the distribution of religious literature by students as long they apply the same restrictions to the distribution of all non-school-related literature.	<i>Hedges v. Wauconda Community Unit School District</i> (1993); <i>Muller v. Jefferson Lighthouse School</i> (1996)
<b>Equal access:</b> If a school opens its facilities to “any noncurriculum related group,” it must open its facilities to all student groups.	<i>Westside Community Board of Education v. Mergens</i> (1990)

## Using a Variety of Strategies and Resources to Foster Religious Diversity

Educators can employ a range of strategies and resources to teach about religion and encourage an awareness of diverse beliefs (Green & Oldendorf, 2005; Haynes, 2005). However, educators must make sure that they teach respect for all religions by presenting these beliefs in a factual, respectful, and neutral manner without promoting or denigrating any religion (Haynes & Thomas, 2001). These strategies include (a) incorporating content about religion into the curriculum, (b) studying holidays and displaying religious/seasonal symbols, (c) using children’s literature, (d) employing technology-based resources, and (e) inviting guest speakers.

### Incorporating Content About Religion Into the Curriculum

One of the best ways to teach about religious diversity is through the curriculum. Whereas many state standards include instruction about religion as part of

social studies, literature, and fine arts curricula (Douglass, 2002; Haynes, 2005), the study of various religions can be incorporated into other subject areas as well. For instance, science, physical education, and health teachers can teach about the different religious dietary regulations. Math teachers can use the architecture of the various houses of worship as examples of geometrical designs.

### Studying Holidays and Displaying Religious/Seasonal Symbols

The study of religious holidays often can meet learning standards across the curriculum. However, when studying holidays and displaying religious or seasonal symbols, educators should make sure that they are used for a variety of groups, are employed as teaching aids and for academic purposes, and are temporary (McDowell, 2002).

Initially, teachers should clearly identify the academic and social goals for including holidays in the educational program, determine which holidays will be studied, and plan how they will be presented appropriately (Bisson,

**TABLE 2**  
**Children's and Young Adult Literature Addressing Religion and Spirituality**

Book Title	Copyright	Author	Publisher	Description
<i>Becoming Buddha: The Story of Siddhartha</i>	2005	Whitney Stewart	Heian International	Siddhartha gives up his worldly ways to attain supreme enlightenment and become the Buddha.
<i>Buddha Stories</i>	1997	Demi	Henry Holt	Ten engaging classic tales from the Buddha's parables told centuries ago in China.
<i>Celebrate Ramadan and Eid Al-Fitr</i>	2006	Heiligman	National Geographic	Examines the historical, religious, and cultural aspect of this Muslim holiday and includes beautiful photographs.
<i>Christianity</i>	2005	David Self	Gareth Stevens	Presents fundamental beliefs, historical events, current status, and practices of Christianity around the globe.
<i>The Christmas Menorahs: How a Town Fought Hate</i>	1995	Janice Cohn	Albert Whitman	Teachers use a rock thrown through a boy's window that displayed a Menorah to discuss hate crimes.
<i>Diwali</i>	2006	Trudi Strain Tueit	Scholastic Library Publishing	Introduces beginning readers to the holidays of Diwali
<i>A Faith Like Mine</i>	2005	Laura Buller	Dorling Kindersley	Children of different religious backgrounds tell about their faith and what it means to them.
<i>In a Sacred Manner I Live: Native American Wisdom</i>	1997	Philip Neil	Clarion	Features a collection of Native American speeches and excerpts, from the 17th century to the present day.
<i>Judaism</i>	2005	Michael Keene	Gareth Stevens	Presents fundamental beliefs, historical events, current status, and practices of Judaism around the globe.
<i>Las Posadas: An Hispanic Christmas Celebration</i>	1999	Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith	Holiday House	A Hispanic American child helps her grandparents host one of the festive nightly gatherings during Christmas.
<i>Muslim Child</i>	1999	Rukhsana Khan	Scholastic	Uses stories and poems to present aspects of the daily lives of Muslim youngsters in various countries.
<i>Noah's Ark</i>	2002	Jerry Pinckney	Weston Woods Studios	Enhances the perennially popular Bible story through Pinkney's illustrations.
<i>Sam I Am</i>	2006	Ilene Cooper	Scholastic	Sam's Jewish father and Christian mother have never quite figured out how to celebrate both holidays.
<i>The Shortest Day: Celebrating the Winter Solstice</i>	2003	Wendy Pfeffer	Penguin	Explains the shortened daylight as winter approaches.

1997). As part of these activities, teachers can include lessons that address the religious and social meaning of various holidays. Plans for students whose families do not want them to participate should be arranged.

One inclusive way to study holidays is to organize them across a range of religions and around common themes. Thus, Ms. Taylor and her school's Diversity Committee could suggest that the school use the theme of "light" to teach students about different religious holidays that are related to that theme such as Hanukkah (Jewish), Christmas (Christian), and Diwali (Hindu; Dever, Whitaker, & Byrnes, 2001). Other common themes for holiday celebrations might focus on the family, life cycle, liberation, cooperation, fasting, seasons, harvests, and planting. Teachers can use these themes to refer to holidays and schoolwide activities in an inclusive manner.

It also is essential that holidays be studied in nonstereotypical and factual ways so that none of the students' religious backgrounds and rituals are excluded, trivialized, or portrayed as exotic (Myers & Myers, 2002). Role-playing and other activities should be avoided as they may be interpreted as a means of stereotyping a group or violating or trivializing the sacred nature of rituals (Haynes, 2005).

Therefore, it is important for educators to research and solicit information from families and religious leaders to understand the authentic and different ways that religious groups celebrate holidays (Bisson, 1997).

### Using Children's Literature

Content about the similarities and differences between a variety of religious and spiritual traditions can be incorporated into the curriculum by using children's and young adult literature (Bisson, 1997; Green & Oldendorf, 2005; Myers & Myers, 2002; Salend, 2008). A sample bibliography of such literature related to the major world religions is presented in Table 2. Because books can present inaccurate and biased information and inadvertently reinforce negative stereotypes, it is important for teachers to identify appropriate books and use them to foster understanding about religious beliefs. Therefore, teachers should carefully review them to identify whether the content and illustrations are factually correct, as well as presented in a respectful, nonstereotypical manner (Green & Oldendorf, 2005; Haynes, 2005; Salend, 2008).

## Employing Technology-Based Resources

Technology-based materials also can be employed to help students learn about religious diversity (Salend, 2008). Relevant DVDs and streaming video can be identified and obtained via use of television station Web sites such as the Public Broadcasting Service ([www.pbs.org/teachersource](http://www.pbs.org/teachersource)), the History Channel ([www.historychannel.com/classroom.html](http://www.historychannel.com/classroom.html)), and the Discovery Channel ([www.school.discovery.com](http://www.school.discovery.com)); streaming video sites such as Safari Video ([www.libraryvideo.com](http://www.libraryvideo.com)), LearnOutLoud ([www.learnoutloud.com](http://www.learnoutloud.com)), and UnitedStreaming ([www.unitedstreaming.com](http://www.unitedstreaming.com)); and commercial video Web sites such as Netflix ([www.netflix.com](http://www.netflix.com)) and Blockbuster ([www.blockbuster.com](http://www.blockbuster.com); Okolo, 2006). Teachers also can search for appropriate podcasts by accessing a directory of free podcasts by content area ([www.podcast.net](http://www.podcast.net)).

## Inviting Guest Speakers

Guest speakers who represent a range of religious groups can be a good resource when teaching about religious diversity. They can present information about their religious beliefs and practices and important historical or social issues, as long as they present information but do not proselytize. For example, guest speakers can help students and teachers understand why students like Yousef celebrate Ramadan and what fasting means to them.

Initially, it is important to identify speakers of different religious beliefs and to determine whether to have several speakers at the same time. Potential guest speakers can be identified by contacting community-based religious organizations and students' families. In selecting guest speakers, teachers should meet with them in advance to determine if they are knowledgeable and can communicate with a younger audience.

Once speakers have been selected, teachers can prepare and discuss the goals of the presentation and possible topics to be covered. It is also important for teachers to share the legal guidelines for teaching about religion with guest speakers. To help speakers tailor their remarks to students, teachers can provide background information about the class such as age and grade level, exposure to and understanding of different religions, and possible questions students may ask.

## Addressing Issues That Affect School Performance

Educators need to be aware of aspects of their students' religions that may affect their school performance and may

require teachers to make respectful accommodations. Religious practices may dictate medical and dietary restrictions, clothing choices, rituals and observances, participation in school events, and absences during holidays (Haynes & Thomas, 2001). Teachers should also be sensitive to the scheduling of assignments and tests near religious holidays. For example, during some holidays, students like Yousef may be required to fast or pray during school hours, miss exams or school for extended periods of time, or have difficulty completing assignments. Similarly, some students like those in Ms. Ramirez's class may not be able to participate in certain school activities because of their religious beliefs. Therefore, teachers and schools need to establish flexible policies that accommodate students who need to

- fast or follow dietary restrictions as part of religious observances,
- observe religious rituals during the school day,
- wear clothing required by religious practice that does not pose a threat to others, and
- be absent or excused from school activities that are of a religious nature (McDowell, 2002).

It also means that educators should avoid scheduling assignments and exams during or near a range of religious celebrations.

## Involving Families

Good collaboration and communication with students' families can strengthen the connection between school and home and help schools identify and address religious issues that affect student performance (Salend, 2008; Taylor & Whittaker, 2009). Families can be an excellent resource for helping educators understand and address the religious and spiritual traditions that affect their children's attendance, participation in activities, diet, dress, learning, or behavior in school (Myers & Myers, 2002). Family members also can collaborate with educators to plan and implement strategies to teach students about their faith (e.g., celebrating holidays, identifying valuable resources and appropriate literature, serving as guest speakers, identifying possible guest speakers). Teachers can solicit this information from families by sending them a letter such as the one presented in Figure 1.

## Dealing With Insensitive and Intolerant Acts

Sometimes students will, intentionally or unintentionally, show disrespect toward another student's religious

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Dear Family Members:

I look forward to having your child in our class this year. I would like to address and be sensitive to your family's religious traditions. If you would like to share information about your family's religious beliefs and practices, I want you to know that I will respect you and your child's confidentiality. Please answer the following questions as they relate to your child's educational program and return it with your signature. If you have any questions, please contact me.

1. Please describe any ways in which your religious traditions affect your child's attendance, participation in activities, diet, dress, learning, or behavior in school.
2. We will be studying the religious traditions of various groups including special occasions. Please describe any religious traditions and special occasions that are important to your family, and identify possible resources (e.g., books, media, technology) our class could use in learning about your family's religious traditions and holidays.
3. We would like to represent all the religious traditions of the students in the classroom. Please indicate if you would be able to talk with the class about your family's traditions, or can provide me with the name, address and phone number of someone who could visit our class to talk about your family's traditions.
4. Please add any other comments or considerations you wish me to know.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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**Figure 1.** Sample Letter to Families

beliefs or practices. Responses to such acts of insensitivity and intolerance will vary depending upon the school's policies; the nature and setting of the act; and the history, age, and intent of the individuals involved. If the intent of the act was not to hurt others, teachers might want to deal with students privately or present the situation confidentially at a class meeting to discuss ways to avoid similar insensitive acts and to respond in a just and caring manner.

Classroom and school-related conflicts related to religious factors also can be handled through use of conflict resolution programs such as peer mediation (Bullock & Foegen, 2002). Therefore, the inappropriate treatment of Andrew and Bella by their classmates could be addressed via peer mediation.

Unfortunately, educators also are likely to encounter students being intentionally intolerant of others, such as making disparaging remarks about sacred symbols, clothing, and jewelry. When this occurs, educators like Mr. George can act promptly and decisively to help their students learn that discriminatory and hurtful behaviors are unacceptable. Prompt, consistent, and firm responses to all acts of intolerance, harassment, and exclusion can minimize their negative effects and serve as a model for how students can react to them.

### **Learning More About Fostering Religious Tolerance**

Addressing religious diversity in schools is an aspect of educational policies and practices that is constantly changing, and new programs, strategies, litigation, and legislation regarding such issues are evolving. Educators can engage in a variety of professional development activities to learn more about fostering religious

diversity. They can read journal articles and books such as those in this article's reference list and view Web sites that offer information and resources addressing issues of religious diversity. The Freedom Forum ([www.freedomforum.org](http://www.freedomforum.org)), the Division on Religion and Spirituality of the American Association on Mental Retardation ([www.aamr.org/Groups/div/RG](http://www.aamr.org/Groups/div/RG)), Iowa State University's e-library on Religion Resources on the Web ([www.lib.iastate.edu/collections/eresourc/religion.html](http://www.lib.iastate.edu/collections/eresourc/religion.html)), and Teaching Tolerance ([www.tolerance.org/index.jsp](http://www.tolerance.org/index.jsp)) offer information and resources addressing religious diversity in schools.

### **Conclusion**

Today's schools are serving students from a variety of religious backgrounds. Although different religious beliefs can be a source of support and learning for students, they can create divisions, conflicts, and challenges that educators need to address. This article helps educators address these challenges by providing guidelines and strategies for teaching students to understand, accept, and value religious diversity. These practices can be incorporated into schoolwide and districtwide policies for addressing other individual differences associated with students and their families and be shared with and discussed by school staff and families to create a school environment that supports an acceptance of religious diversity.

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