



Religion in the Public Schools

The issue of the proper role of religion in the public schools continues to be the subject of great controversy. School officials, parents and students – as well as lawyers and judges – wrestle with these questions every day. However, clear standards and guidance are elusive. This handbook will help provide a roadmap through this terrain.

It is important to bear in mind that this issue is extremely complex. Decision makers must address many competing demands, invariably looking to balance the constitutional mandates of separation of church and state and the right to freely exercise religion, as well as freedom of speech. They must include in their thinking the needs and rights of both the religious and the non-religious. Furthermore, decision makers must strive towards a vision of a pluralistic America that is open and welcoming to all groups, including religious minorities.

This subject matter area, while complex, does not have to be divisive. School districts should set forth clear policies regarding religion in the public schools that satisfy both the letter and the spirit of the First Amendment. Parents should become involved in the process of discussing these policies with educators, and approach difficulties with an understanding that mistakes and misinformation, not malice, underlie a great many of the problems which typically arise in this area.

Addressing these concerns with civility does not mean that those involved should understate the importance of these issues, nor should they shy away from

insisting that their concerns are heard and addressed. Rather, all of us should recognize that although we may define it differently, our common goal is to ensure that the vision of religious liberty upon which this nation was founded is preserved. Few Americans would disagree that our individual religious freedom is extremely precious and that no one should be subjected to inappropriate religious coercion.

The Anti-Defamation League has been fighting anti-Semitism, racism and bigotry since 1913. To that end, we have been fighting for the religious liberty rights of all Americans – whether in the minority or majority – to practice their religions freely and without government interference. As a result, we have developed an expertise in this area. We encourage you to reach out to your local Anti-Defamation League Regional Office any time you think we can be of assistance.

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Religious Liberty in America & Our Public Schools

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Prayer in Public Schools

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Religious Doctrine in the Science Classroom

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The December Dilemma: Teaching About Religious Holidays

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Release Time Programs

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Use of School Facilities By Outside Religious Organizations

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Distribution of Religious Materials by Students

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Distribution of Religious Materials and Proselytizing by Outside Groups and Individuals

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