

CMP Religious Holiday Policy

In response to parent request and legalities, CMP provides the following concerning religious holidays and public education; a subject at times marked by confusion and conflict.

CMP recommends that teachers, school officials, parents and students, approach this discussion as an opportunity to work cooperatively for the sake of good education rather than at cross-purposes.

CMP's religious holiday policy was developed based on the shared commitment of respect for individual religious beliefs expressed in the constitutional guarantee of religious liberty. This means that CMP neither promotes nor inhibits religious belief or non-belief. Because Montessori classrooms are rich in cultural lessons and materials CMP takes into account the role of religion in history and cultures.

CMP is aware of the legal issues surrounding the guidelines about the teaching of religion in public schools. Within the current legal framework, CMP, their boards, administrators, teachers, parents and students must make practical decisions regarding religious holidays. We have done this by showing sensitivity to the needs of every student and a willingness to steer a course between avoidance of all references to religion on one hand and the promotion of religion on the other.

The Supreme Court has ruled that public schools may not sponsor religious practices (*Engel v. Vitale*, 1962; *Abington v. Schempp*, 1963) but may teach about religion.

While having avoided making a definitive ruling on religious holidays in public schools, the Supreme Court let stand a lower federal court decision stating that recognition of holidays may be constitutional if the purpose is to provide secular instruction about religious traditions rather than to promote the particular religion involved (*Flore v. Sioux Falls School District*, 8th Cir., 1980).

CMP policy allows for the study of religious holidays in our schools as opportunities for teaching about religions of various cultures and societies. Such study is to serve the academic goals of educating students about history and cultures, as well as learning about the traditions of particular religions within a pluralistic society.

Teaching about religious holidays will be conducted when natural opportunities arise during the course of the year as students study different cultures and communities. Teachers are alerted to the distinction between teaching about religious holidays, which is permissible, and celebrating religious holidays, which is not. Recognition of and information about holidays may focus on how and when they are celebrated, their origins, histories and generally agreed-upon meanings. Our approach needs to be sensitive, neither promoting nor inhibiting religion. We desire to foster understanding and mutual respect for differences in belief and culture.

Teachers are to avoid asking students to explain their beliefs and customs. An offer to do so should be treated with courtesy and accepted or rejected depending upon the educational relevancy.

Teachers will not use the study of religious holidays as an opportunity to proselytize or to inject personal religious beliefs into class discussions. Teachers can avoid this by teaching attribution, i.e., by reporting that “some Buddhists believe, some Christians believe. . . .”

Teachers may use religious symbols as examples of cultural and religious heritage. Religious symbols may be displayed only on a temporary basis as part of the academic program. Students may choose to create artwork with religious symbols, but teachers should not encourage or discourage such creations.

Sacred music may be sung or played as part of the academic study of music. School concerts that present a variety of selections may include religious music. Concerts should avoid programs dominated by religious music, especially when these coincide with a particular religious holiday.

Seasonal activities such as parent holiday programs are to serve an educational purpose for all of the students. Children should not be made to feel excluded or identified with a religion not their own.

Holiday concerts in December may appropriately include music related to Christmas and Hanukkah, and religious music should not dominate. Dramatic productions should emphasize the cultural aspects of the holidays. Nativity pageants or plays portraying the Hanukkah miracle are not appropriate in the public school setting.

Students may be excused from classroom discussions or activities related to particular holidays. CMP acknowledges that some holidays considered by many people to be secular (for example, Halloween and Valentine’s Day) are viewed by others to have religious overtones. Excusal requests will be granted for holidays that are marked by classroom parties and similar non-academic activities.

In addition, some parents and students may choose to make requests for excusals from discussions of certain holidays even when treated from an academic perspective. Such requests may be granted as needed on a limited, specific discussion, in order to strike a balance between the student’s religious freedom and the school’s interest in providing a well-rounded education.

Students may be allowed a reasonable number of excused absences, without penalties, to observe religious events within their traditions. Students may be asked to complete makeup assignments or examinations in conjunction with such absences.