



**DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Office of the Superintendent

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POST IMMEDIATELY

TO: All School and Central Office Administrators

FROM: Paul L. Vance
Superintendent

DATE: December 14, 2001

RE: **Religious Neutrality Requirements**

As we approach the winter holiday season, let us be mindful that we are required under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution to avoid entanglement with religious issues and activities. As a public school system, we must maintain religious neutrality in our schools, offices and related activities.

Specifically, you are directed to adhere to the following guidelines during this winter holiday season, and as you begin to plan for commencement and promotion exercises in the coming year.

1. You are permitted to teach about religious holidays such as Christmas, Ramadan, Hanukkah, Easter and Passover, without proselytizing, only if you are teaching about diverse religions and religious practices around the World. **You may not inject personal religious beliefs into the classroom, or, of course, denigrate any religious belief or practice.**
2. You should not hold celebratory events, like school or office "Christmas parties," during a holiday season. **All parties must have a religiously neutral theme.**
3. Concerts and music, whether during the holidays or not, must present a variety of music that represents various religious and cultural traditions. **Although some religious music can be performed, it must not dominate the program.** The cultural, not the worshipful aspects of a holiday, must be emphasized during any program, whether musical or not.

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4. Even when the theme of a musical or other program is consistent with neutrality standards, parents may request that their children be excused from attending or participating in holiday events. Those requests should be granted when made.
5. **Religious symbols are not to be used in the public school system.** If used in a classroom, they must only be used in the context of studying the cultural and historical significance of the holiday or religious practice, and not used for religious practice or worship.
6. **Teachers, other staff and administrators must remain neutral regarding religious holidays and issues, by not encouraging or discouraging religious activity.**
7. **No school-sponsored events are to be held in places of worship, especially in sanctuaries and other areas dedicated to worship or giving the appearance of being so dedicated.**
8. **School-sponsored prayer at school-sponsored events is not permitted, regardless of who leads the prayer. Baccalaureate services are not to be sponsored or encouraged by the school or its staff.**

This memorandum is to be prominently posted in your schools and offices, and the directives are to be shared with your staffs.

The failure to adhere to these directives may result in adverse action. If you have any questions, you may contact the Office of the General Counsel at (202) 442-5000.

Have a safe and happy winter holiday, and successful New Year.

cc: Veleter M. B. Mazyck