

CMS, School Board Approves Religion in Schools Policy

By Amy Krakovitz Montoni

In response to the community's concern with how religion is represented in our public schools, a committee consisting of leaders in our religious and educational community, including Temple Beth El's Rabbi Jim Bennett, Reverend Tim Moore, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg School's Ellen Edmonds, created a policy for Religion in the Schools. This policy was presented to the CMS School Board and was approved on August 11, 1998.

The policy itself consists of 16 points (see sidebar) which are directed to school personnel: principals, teachers, and staff. CMS plans to instruct personnel on the policy; not just on religious issues, but on tolerance as a whole. It will be the responsibility of principals to enforce the policy in each of their schools, and to continue with training teachers and staff in religious and cultural tolerance throughout the year.

The School Issues Subcommittee of the Federation's Jewish Community Relations Committee convened a meeting on August 25, 1998 where the policy was presented to the community. Members of the CMS committee that created the policy, Rabbi Bennett, Rev. Moore and Ms. Edmonds, were available to answer questions regarding the creation of the policy and their hopes for implementing it.

Rabbi Bennett mentioned that

he had two concerns that needed to be met in the formulation of this policy: 1) How to protect the interests of the minority, specifically Jewish, students, and 2) How to maintain a commitment to the democratic process, that all voices must be heard. It became obvious to him that they were successful in their endeavors when the School Board voted on the policy: both conservatives and liberals who voted in favor of the policy were "thrilled" with it.

Edmonds, the CMS representative, said that they were very careful to follow existing case law when writing this policy. One example she gave was the issue of the Christmas tree. According to the Supreme Court, Christmas trees are secular, not religious, symbols, and could therefore not be prohibited by this or any other policy.

On the other hand, Reverend Moore agreed with the vast majority at the meeting that Christmas trees, Santa Claus, and Easter bunnies were inappropriate teaching tools. For him, however, it diluted what he felt was the true meaning of the Christian holidays.

While CMS plans to instruct staff on the policy, much of the responsibility of enforcing the policy lies with the parents. "What we experience as a community stems from ignorance," said Edmonds, "not from prejudice." Educating our children's teachers

and principals will go a long way to maintaining the atmosphere we want in the public schools.

If, however, parents do encounter incidents that they consider objectionable, they do have recourse: The first step is speak directly with your child's teacher regarding her classroom policy or the behavior of another child in the class. In most cases this will probably be all the parent needs to do. However, if you aren't satisfied with the results of this conversation, you should next approach the school's principal with your concerns. If the principal cannot satisfy you, each region in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system has an Assistant Superintendent. Your region's supervisor should be next on your list to present your problem to. Finally, if nothing can be done about the problem at this point, you can see Barbara Pellin, the Assistant Superintendent for Family Services. Marvin Goldberg at the Jewish Federation of Greater Charlotte will also be available to assist you with any problems regarding the religion in schools policy. He can be reached at 366-5007.

Many thanks to Tammy Seigel and Jackie Fishman of the School Issues Subcommittee of the Federation's Jewish Community Relations Committee. Adam Bernstein chairs the Jewish Community Relations Committee.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education Religion in Schools Policy #5136

Teachers and other staff members shall incorporate the highest standards of honesty, integrity, and morality in all of their teaching, counseling, and other contacts with students. Because there are students, teachers, and staff of many religious faiths, convictions and beliefs in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, school staff members must be sensitive to the freedom of religion and other Constitutional rights of all. The following guidelines on religion and religious practices in the schools are provided in order to avoid infringement of individual rights and to set forth the Board's position concerning certain religious issues:

1. Teachers may include religion's role in appropriate subjects in the curriculum, such as literature, history, the humanities, and the arts. Neither teachers nor guest speakers shall promote religion and should use fairness and objectivity when presenting subjects that address religion.

2. Staff shall be sensitive to how religious holidays may impact the behavior, appearance, or attendance of students and staff. Examinations and other major events will not be scheduled on religious holidays designated by the Superintendent. School personnel shall use sensitivity and good judgment when scheduling school activities.

3. Students who miss school because of religious reasons should not be adversely affected because of the absence.

4. School personnel should avoid activities or assignments that would be deemed to be objectionable on religious grounds. If a parent should object to an activity, school personnel will grant parent's written request to have a student excused. An equivalent alternative activity will be provided for the student.

5. The temporary use of religious symbols, seasonal celebrations, and music is permitted. An effort towards diversity and mutual respect is expected.

6. A moment of silence not to exceed one minute in duration is permitted for quiet reflection provided that no further instructions are given on how the period of silence is to be used.

7. Historical survey courses which offer an elective credit in social studies or which offer an elective credit in language arts, may include the teaching of sacred writings and are permitted as part of the high school curriculum.

8. Appropriate religious books may be given to students as a part of course work but may not be generally distributed by religious groups to students at school.

9. Students may read religious materials during the school day except when it interferes with classroom work or other school activities.

10. No restrictions shall be placed on prayer by individual students or groups of students as long as it does not interfere in anyway with the school program.

11. Religious groups or clubs may be organized and meet on school premises before or after school or during time designated by the principal for non-instructional activities, with the same privileges as other non-curriculum related school clubs.

12. School personnel may read religious materials and pray on their free time and may carry or wear religious symbols when on duty at school as long as it does not interfere with their work. Principals and other administrative personnel should be sensitive to and show respect for religious beliefs held by other employees and students. In dealing with religious issues, they should do so in a manner that will not show or imply favor or disfavor with any employee's or student's religious beliefs.

13. Religious groups, just as any other non-school related group, will be permitted use of school facilities provided there is no conflict with school activities and Board policy and administrative regulations #1330 are followed.

14. Graduation exercises, assemblies, and other school-sponsored events will not include centrally led or school system sanctioned group prayer but may include a moment of silence in accordance with paragraph 6. Individual students and groups of students may pray in accordance with paragraph 10 of this policy.

15. Counseling of students or informal discussions with students by school personnel shall neither infringe on the students' religious beliefs nor seek to influence students' religious beliefs.

16. In scheduling speakers for classes and school assembly programs, schools may schedule motivational speakers. Guest speakers will not promote religion.

The Last Word

Pro-Active Responses to Religious Issues in Your Child's School

These suggestions come from Jackie Fishman and Tammy Seigel of the Jewish Community Relations School Issues Subcommittee.

- Be positive, patient, and have realistic expectations.
- Choose your "battles" carefully.
- Communicate early in the school year with your child's teacher about your religious holidays and how observances of these holidays will affect your child in the classroom.
- Network with other parents of your faith.
- Create a parent team to share successful strategies.
- Share your holidays as an educational tool in your child's classroom (with teacher approval).
- Provide resources for your teacher to better understand your holidays and religious practices.
- Develop a brochure that explains your religious holidays which can be distributed to teachers.
- Encourage and support multicultural programming within your school.
- Praise positive efforts toward inclusion and religious tolerance.
- Use these moments as teaching moments to your children.

The Anti-Defamation League has also developed materials about religion in public schools called *The ABC's of Religion in Public Schools*. This can be accessed from their website at www.adl.org/ADLR_ept/ChurchStateFolder/ABC_Postcard.html

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