

## Background

In 1986, a task force on cultural diversity was formed in the Williamsville Central School District to study the degree to which students were learning about different religious and cultural groups. The task force recommended that the PACER (Planning Advancement of Curriculum and Educational Research) Committee be instrumental in initiating multicultural programs, such as: staff development for teachers, a multicultural resource booklet, and a kindergarten through grade twelve Infusion of Multicultural Curriculum.

As a natural outgrowth of these activities, and recognizing an increasingly diverse population, on November 5, 1991 the Williamsville Board of Education authorized a Committee on Religion to study the district's philosophy and practice on multicultural and religious issues.

The 22-member Committee on Cultural Diversity and Religion, with Board of Education, school, and community representation, made content recommendations to the Board of Education in June 1992. A subcommittee then developed the recommendations into a policy format.

The Board of Education reviewed the draft at public meetings, received input and made revisions. They adopted the policy on March 9, 1993. This was followed by the development of regulations by district administrators. The policy sets the broad parameters of an issue while the regulations are specific administrative guidelines for implementing the policy.

The four main areas addressed in the policy include: school activities related to religious holidays or themes, use of religious symbols, music in the schools, and the district calendar. Instruction and activities in each of these areas are guided by four basic questions:

- Is it Constitutionally permissible?
- Is it educationally sound?
- Is it culturally sensitive? and
- Is it age appropriate?

The purpose of the Policy on Cultural Diversity and Religion in the school district is to foster the development of knowledge, understanding, and respect for the various cultural and religious groups in and outside of our community.

*“We hope to create an environment where students of various cultural and religious backgrounds feel comfortable and accepted in our schools.”*

## Our Mission

The mission of the Williamsville Central School District, a community characterized by diversity, high expectations and support for learning, is to empower all students

- to develop their unique potentials and character,
- to assume responsibilities of citizenship and leadership, and
- to thrive in a challenging and rapidly changing global community

through the commitment of our quality staff, in partnership with parents and community, utilizing visionary programs in a nurturing environment of mutual respect and dignity.

**Civil Rights Policy - The Williamsville Central School District, its officers and employees shall not discriminate against any student, employee or applicant on the basis of race, color, creed, religion, national origin, political affiliation, gender, sexual orientation, age, marital status, veteran status, or disability. It is the policy of the Board of Education to comply with the regulations listed in Title IX of the 1972 Educational Requirements and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Any member of the Williamsville Central School District staff or any Williamsville Central School District pupil or parent believing himself or herself aggrieved because of discrimination based on race, color, creed, religion, national origin, political affiliation, gender, sexual orientation, age, marital status, veteran status, or disability should address questions and complaints to the District Compliance Officer and Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources, Dr. John McKenna, 105 Casey Rd., P.O. Box 5000, East Amherst, NY 14051; 626-8051.**



# RELIGION *in our schools*

A brief review of the  
**Williamsville Central School District  
Policy on Cultural Diversity  
and Religion**

*www.williamsvillek12.org*



## *about Cultural Diversity and Religion*

### **Q. What is the Policy on Cultural Diversity and Religion?**

- A. The Policy on Cultural Diversity and Religion is a written description of the broad parameters within which the Williamsville Central School District will approach topics involving teaching about religion and cultures in our public schools. We hope to create an environment where students of various cultural and religious backgrounds feel comfortable and accepted in our schools.

### **Q. Can our teachers talk about religion?**

- A. Not only do our teachers have a right to talk about religion, but they have an obligation to teach about different religious and cultural groups within the framework of the New York State and Williamsville Central School District curriculum. Students are provided with opportunities to learn about cultural and religious traditions in our community and the world.

Information about religious and cultural holidays and traditions focusing on how and when they are celebrated, their origins and histories, are infused in our present curricular areas. Religious music and art are used to teach concepts, to convey historical and cultural content, and to create aesthetic experiences in a setting which emphasizes artistic expression and educational value.

### **Q. Will my child be learning about religion?**

- A. Yes, there is a kindergarten through grade twelve curriculum that infuses the study of religion and cultures in social studies. When appropriate, religious topics may arise in other areas such as art and music.

If you have any additional questions regarding our Cultural Diversity and Religion Policy, please contact Rita Wolff, Director of Communication, at 626-8008 or Karen Greco, Instructional Specialist, at 626-8033.

### **Q. Can our teachers display religious artifacts in school?**

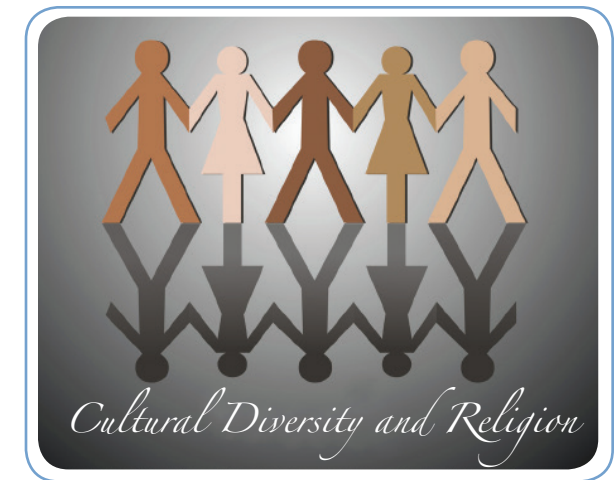
- A. Yes, teachers are encouraged, while teaching about a religion, to display artifacts that help explain or clarify religious concepts and traditions that are included as part of a curriculum unit. The use of these artifacts or displays should provide an environment wherein students of all faiths and backgrounds can participate without betraying their own beliefs.

### **Q. How do we determine what holidays are recognized by having time off from school?**

- A. The Board of Education annually approves the school calendar. Consideration of the religious and cultural demographics in our community help to determine which days our schools will be in session.

### **Q. What is prohibited in the policy? Why?**

- A. The district prohibits the promotion of the study of one religion over another. It also prohibits proselytization. These prohibitions are the result of court decisions stating that we can teach about religion but may not sponsor religious practices. They also state that we can recognize religious holidays if the purpose is to provide secular instruction about religious traditions rather than promote a particular religion.



### **Q. What about prayer in the schools?**

- A. Students have a right to pray individually or in groups as long as they are not disruptive to the school day. However, the right to engage in voluntary prayer does not include, for example, the right to have a captive audience listen or to compel other students to participate.

### **Q. How has the policy affected musical performances?**

- A. Musical programs prepared for or presented by student groups as an outcome of the instructional program may include religious music. However, a religious theme or religious holiday celebration should not be the focus of the program.

### **Q. In what other ways can students express their religious faith within public schools?**

- A. Individual student initiated expressions in response to any given project may take the form of religious writing, musical compositions, or artwork. These creations will be guided, evaluated, and displayed by the teacher in the same manner as any other student product. The wearing of religious symbols by a student is also a protected expression of faith.