# Religious Liberty Issues:

# Teaching About Religions and Accommodation of Student Religious Practices

First Amendment Center web portal for Religious Liberty Issues & Publications at <http://www.religionpublicschools.org/>

*“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”*

--First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

**GUIDES FOR TEACHING ABOUT RELIGION**

*A Parents’ Guide to Religion in Public Education* <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/PDF/parentsguidereligion.PDF>

*A Teacher’s Guide to Religion in the Public Schools* at <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/PDF/teachersguide.PDF>

“Religious Expression in American Public Life: A Joint Statement of Current Law.” <http://divinity.wfu.edu/pdf/DivinityLawStatement.pdf>

**The basic principles or guidelines are:**

All public school teachers must have a clear understanding of the crucial difference between the teaching of religion (religious education) and teaching about religion. In 1988, a broad coalition of 17 religious and educational organizations published guidelines that distinguish between teaching about religion and religious indoctrination. The guidelines state, in part:

* The school's approach to religion is *academic,* not *devotional.*
* The school strives for student awareness of religions, but does not press for student *acceptance* of any one religion.
* The school sponsors *study* about religion, not the *practice* of religion.
* The school *exposes* students to a diversity of religious views; it does not *impose* any particular view.
* The school *educates* about all religions; it does not *promote* or *denigrate* any religion.
* The school *informs* students about various beliefs; it does not seek to *conform* students to any particular belief.

In addition to these baseline distinctions, the religious-liberty clauses provide guiding principles for how teaching about religion may best be carried out in the classroom. Charles Haynes, the First Amendment Center’s senior scholar, calls these principles the civic values at the heart of American citizenship: “They are so fundamental and enduring that they may be called the ‘Three Rs’ of religious liberty”:

**Rights:** Religious liberty, or freedom of conscience, is a basic and inalienable right founded on the inviolable dignity of the person. In a society as religiously diverse as the United States, it is essential that schools emphasize that the rights guaranteed by the Constitution are for citizens of all faiths and none.

**Responsibilities:** Religious liberty is not only a universal right, but it also depends upon a universal responsibility to respect that right for others, treating others as we ourselves desire to be treated. All citizens must recognize the inseparable link between the preservation of their own constitutional rights and their responsibility as citizens to defend those rights for all others. This is what the Williamsburg Charter calls the "Golden Rule for civic life."

**Respect:** Debate and disagreement are vital to classroom discussion and a key element of preparation for citizenship in a democracy. Yet, if we are to live with our differences, particularly our religious differences, *how* we debate, and not only *what* we debate, is critical. At the heart of good citizenship is a strong commitment to the civic values that enable people with diverse religious and philosophical perspectives to treat one another with respect and civility.

OVERVIEW AND ISSUES ON TEACHING ABOUT RELIGIONS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS at <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/rel_liberty/publicschools/topic.aspx?topic=teaching_about_religion>

**Websites of Organizations Supporting Teaching about Religion**

Harvard University Pluralism Project at <http://pluralism.org/>

PEW Forum on Religion & Public Life – Issues at <http://pewforum.org/religion-schools/>

This study is about the impact of learning about world religions in a high school elective course:

* *Learning about World Religions in Public School: the impact on student attitudes and community acceptance in Modesto, CA* (First Amendment Center, 2006 Emile Lester/Patrick S. Roberts (<http://iis-db.stanford.edu/pubs/21196/FirstForum_ModestoWorldReligions.pdf> )

Georgetown University Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at <http://cmcu.georgetown.edu>; information and lesson materials at <http://cmcuworkshops.net/?page_id=4>

Institute on Religion and Civic Values at <http://www.ircv.org/>

**OVERVIEW AND ISSUES ABOUT STUDENT RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS at** <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/rel_liberty/publicschools/topic.aspx?topic=student_religious_practices>

**Model Accommodation Policy Statement, Fairfax County Public Schools, Virginia** at <http://www.fcps.edu/DHR/employees/oec/relguide.htm> (This policy is typical of many districts across the US, though FCPS is a leader in both teaching about religion and religious accommodation issues. This is the district in which George Mason University is located, an ethnically and religiously diverse urban/suburban area) **See** [**http://www.fcps.edu/DHR/employees/oec/relguide.htm**](http://www.fcps.edu/DHR/employees/oec/relguide.htm) **for full text.**