

**Greenville County Schools**  
**Public Schools and Religious Expression**

**Guide for GCS Employees**

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We respect and support the right of students and employees to individual religious expression and recognize that separation of Church and State and religious expression can be a confusing issue for students, parents and educators. As a result, most questions regarding separation of Church and State and religious expression require review on a case-by-case basis. Below are several basic points regarding separation of Church and State and religious expression and a Q&A addressing some common questions.

- By law, public schools and employees, while in their official work capacity, must be neutral on all matters related to religion and can neither discourage nor encourage religious expression.
- Students have the right to religious expression as long as their expression does not disrupt instruction and/or the operation of the school day. Employees' actions may neither discourage nor encourage religious expression by students. Religious expression and its impact on school is considered on a case-by-case basis.
- Religions and their observances may be objectively taught as part of an academic course. For example, a course may examine different cultures and the various religious beliefs. A student can write about his/her religious beliefs as part of a class assignment to the same extent that a student can write about nonreligious topics or content. Teachers must judge all student work under the same academic standards.
- Student speakers at school-sponsored events such as student assemblies, extracurricular activities and graduations may not be selected on a basis that either favors or disfavors religious speech. Where student speakers are selected on the basis of neutral criteria and retain primary control over the content of their expression, that expression is not attributable to the school and therefore may include religious content. In contrast, where school officials determine or substantially control the content of what is expressed, such speech is attributable to the school and may not include prayer or other specifically religious content.

**Questions and Answers**

**Students**

**Can students pray at school?**

*Certainly. Students can pray at school, subject to the same rules for any expression preventing disruption of school. Teachers and other school employees may neither discourage nor encourage students from praying. Students can initiate and lead prayer at appropriate times. For example, a student may pray individually or as part of a group before a meal at school as long as the expression is initiated by a student(s) and is not disruptive or harassing of other students.*

**Can students pray to start the school day?**

*Yes, students can pray to start the school day. Schools cannot discourage or encourage prayer. Per State law, all SC public schools provide a minute of mandatory silence at the beginning of each school day. During that observance, students may choose to pray silently or not to pray.*

**Can students read their Bible at school?**

*Students may read their Bibles and religious literature, pray, and/or study religious materials with fellow students during recess, lunch or other non-instructional time while at school to the same extent that they may engage in nonreligious activities.*

**Can students wear religious symbols?**

*Symbols, religious or non-religious, can be worn (jewelry, etc.) and/or displayed on clothing as long as such display is not disruptive to school or in violation of a school's dress code (ex: school uniforms).*

**Can students on athletic teams pray?**

*Students participating in a school-sponsored activity (ex: athletic team) may initiate and lead voluntary prayer. For example, players on a team may lead voluntary prayer before a game. Coaches and other employees may not direct a student to lead a prayer, or lead a prayer. Employees may be present for the prayer and respectfully observe or pray silently on their own.*

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### **Can high schools conduct baccalaureate services as part of graduation?**

*Because it is generally understood that a baccalaureate service is a religious event, neither a public school nor its employees, in an official work capacity, may be involved in the planning and/or execution of a baccalaureate service. During non-work hours, employees may plan, attend and participate. Schools facilities are available equally to outside groups for religious or nonreligious purposes.*

### **Prayer at Public Events**

#### **Can a prayer be given over the PA system before a public event such as a football game?**

*The law stipulates that schools and their employees can neither discourage nor encourage prayer. A moment of silence or a sportman's creed can be observed/given. Prayer may be given over the PA system only if other speakers are given the same opportunity to deliver non-religious messages.*

#### **Can employees and students participate in Rally Around the Flagpole?**

*Rally Around the Flagpole is a public event that is sometimes held prior to the start of school on school property. Neither a public school nor its employees, in an official work capacity, may be involved in the planning and/or execution of the event. During non-work hours, employees may plan, attend and participate. As for all public events, students may choose to participate.*

### **Religious Holidays**

#### **Can religious holidays be promoted in public schools?**

*In accordance with the United States Constitution, public schools cannot promote religious holidays. Religions and their observances may be taught as part of a course or a school-wide study. For example, students may examine different cultures and the various religious beliefs.*

*The non-religious traditions of a holiday can be observed. For example, while Christmas is a Christian holiday, it has traditions and practices such as the use of a Christmas Tree that have been recognized as secular in nature. In addition, holiday concerts may include religious and non-religious music from various cultures. Schools often have holiday parties. In planning holiday parties, teachers and parents are to be mindful of the different religious beliefs and cultures represented in their schools.*

*Students may wear whatever clothing they choose (color, wording, or otherwise) that complies with the school's Dress Code, and they may express holiday greetings --- "Merry Christmas," "Happy Hanukah," etc. Employees may also express respectful holiday greetings.*

### **Employees**

#### **Can employees express their religious beliefs at school?**

*Yes, to the extent that their expression does not endorse or promote religion or express hostility toward religion. For example, teachers may pray silently during the moment of silence at the beginning of each school day or pray silently before having a meal in the cafeteria. Employees may wear personal clothing with religious symbols as long as wearing those personal items does not cause a disruption to the school environment and/or is not used by an employee to promote religion to students. Bibles and other religious literature may be kept at work. However, these items should not be displayed in a manner that would constitute promotion of religion.*

#### **What is the role of a high school employee during a meeting of a non-curriculum student-initiated club such as FCA?**

*In accordance with Board Policy JHCA, employees provide adult supervision and cannot actively participate during meetings of student-initiated clubs.*

**If you have a question or need clarification of your rights, please discuss with your supervisor. Principals and administrators with questions should call the General Counsel's Office at 355-8866.**