

8800B - RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION IN THE DISTRICT

The following guidelines apply to religious practices in the District and are drawn directly from the "Statement of Principles" issued by the U.S. Department of Education.

Student Prayer and Religious Instruction

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment does not prohibit purely private religious speech by students. Students have the same right to engage in individual or group prayer and religious discussion during the school day as they do to engage in other comparable activity. For example, students may read their Bibles or other scriptures, say grace before meals, and pray before tests to the same extent they may engage in comparable nondisruptive activities. Local school authorities possess substantial discretion to impose rules of order and other pedagogical restrictions on student activities, but they may not structure or administer such rules to discriminate against religious activity or speech.

Generally, students may pray in a nondisruptive manner when not engaged in school activities or instructions and subject to the rules that normally pertain in the applicable setting. Specifically, students in informal settings, such as cafeterias or hallways, may pray and discuss their religious views with each other, subject to the same rules of order as apply to other student activities and speech. Students may also speak to, and attempt to persuade, their peers about religious topics just as they do with regard to political topics. School officials, however, should intercede to stop student speech that constitutes harassment aimed at a student group or a group of students.

Students may also participate in before or after school events with religious content, such as "see you at the flagpole" gatherings, on the same terms as they may participate in other noncurriculum activities on school premises. School officials may neither discourage nor encourage participation in such an event.

The right to engage in voluntary prayer or religious discussion free from discrimination does not include the right to have a captive audience listen or to compel other students to participate. Teachers and school administrators should ensure that no student is in any way coerced to participate in religious activity.