

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM?

How well do you know your rights? How about rights for religious expression at school? Since 1993 the President declares January 16 to be Religious Freedom Day. It's the anniversary of the 1786 Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom, drafted by Thomas Jefferson.

He considered it one of his greatest achievements. It also led to the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America. The US Department of Education has issued guidance regarding student and educator freedom of expression. Here are excerpts:

1- "You can express your faith in your class work and homework, artwork, and other written and oral assignments, free from discrimination based on the religious perspective of your submissions. The work should be judged by ordinary academic standards of substance and relevance, and neither penalized nor rewarded on account of its religious perspective."

2- "You can pray, read your Bible or other religious texts, and talk about your faith. Students may read their Scriptures; say grace before meals; and pray, or study religious materials with fellow students during non-instructional time, to the same extent that they may engage in nonreligious activities, on the same terms and conditions that they may engage in other conversation or speech. Students may also speak to, and attempt to persuade, their peers about religious topics just as they do with regard to political topics."

3- "You can pass out religious literature to schoolmates on the same terms as students are permitted to distribute other literature that is unrelated to school curriculum or activities, and schools may not single out religious literature for special regulation."

4- "You can wear clothing with religious messages to the same extent that students are permitted to display other comparable messages. Religious messages may not be singled out for suppression, but rather are subject to the same rules as generally apply to comparable messages. Schools may not single out religious attire for prohibition or regulation."

5- "You can organize prayer groups and religious clubs, see-you-at-the-pole gatherings, etc, and announce meetings, to the same extent that students are permitted to organize other noncurricular activities groups. They must be given the same access to school facilities, without discrimination because of the religious perspective of their expression such as prayer."

6- "Your religious club can require student leaders to adhere to its religious teachings, if these leadership positions affect the religious content of the speech at the group's meetings, such as leading prayers, devotions, and safeguarding the spiritual content of the meetings."

7- "You can be excused from school for religious reasons on the same basis of parents' requests for accommodation of nonreligious needs. In some circumstances, based on Federal or State constitutional law or pursuant to State statutes, schools may be required to make accommodations that relieve substantial burdens on students' religious exercise."

8- "You may be able to attend off-site religious instruction and have your religious exercise accommodated during the school day, provided that schools do not encourage or discourage participation in such instruction or penalize students for attending or not attending. Schools may excuse students from class to remove a significant burden on their religious exercise, including prayer, where doing so would not impose material burdens on other students."

9- "You can express your faith at school events, graduations, student assemblies and sports events, where student speakers are selected on the basis of genuinely content-neutral, even-handed criteria and retain primary control over the content of their expression, including prayer. It is not attributable to the school and therefore may not be restricted because of its content."

Go to "ReligiousFreedomDay.com" or "GoGateways.org" for helpful resources and downloads, including materials for civics lessons and school curriculum. It is said that religious freedom means the government leaves religion alone as much as possible, so people can exercise their religion as freely as possible. Americans observe Religious Freedom Day on January 16, but we exercise religious freedom *EVERY DAY*. Use it, and don't lose it! ☐