

EXERCISE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Hardy County Schools is committed to upholding the fundamental constitutional right of religious freedom for all students, staff, and community members within the boundaries of our school district. We recognize the importance of providing an inclusive and respectful environment that respects individuals' exercise of religion while adhering to the legal framework established by the U.S. Constitution and relevant judicial standards. This policy aims to address and remedy any instances of excessive government limitations on the exercise of religion within our schools.

Guiding Principles:

1. **Respect for Religious Diversity:** Hardy County Schools recognizes and values the diversity of religious beliefs within our community. We are committed to fostering an inclusive environment where individuals are free to express their faith without fear of discrimination or exclusion.
2. **Constitutional Protections:** We acknowledge the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, which guarantees the right to the free exercise of religion. Our school district is dedicated to upholding these constitutional protections and ensuring that the exercise of religious beliefs is not unnecessarily burdened by government restrictions.
3. **Balancing Act:** While religious freedom is a fundamental right, it is not absolute. Hardy County Schools acknowledges that certain limitations on religious exercise may be necessary to maintain a safe and respectful learning environment, to prevent coercion, and to avoid the endorsement of any specific religious belief.

Policy Implementation:

1. **Religious Expression in Educational Activities:** Students and staff members are permitted to engage in voluntary, non-disruptive religious expression within the school environment, including prayer, religious clothing, jewelry, and symbols. Such expression must not interfere with the educational process or infringe upon the rights of others.
2. **Accommodations for Religious Practices:** Hardy County Schools will make reasonable accommodations to allow students and staff to observe their religious practices and holidays. Requests for accommodations should be communicated to the appropriate school authorities in advance, and every effort will be made to honor these requests while considering the overall school schedule and activities.
3. **Curriculum and Religious Content:** The curriculum will reflect a fair and objective treatment of religion, providing students with an understanding of various faiths and their cultural significance. While religious education will not promote or favor any belief, it will allow students to explore and learn about different religions.
4. **Government Limitations Review:** Hardy County Schools will periodically review its policies and practices to ensure that they do not unduly limit the exercise of religion. If a government limitation is identified as excessive or burdensome on religious exercise, the school district will take appropriate steps to remedy the situation while maintaining a balanced approach that respects the rights of all individuals.

Compliance and Enforcement:

1. Reporting Mechanism: Any student, staff member, or community member who believes their right to religious exercise has been unduly limited within Hardy County Schools is encouraged to report the matter to the appropriate school authority.
2. Investigation and Resolution: The school district will promptly investigate reported instances of excessive government limitations on religious exercise. If a violation is substantiated, appropriate corrective actions will be taken to remedy the situation and prevent future occurrences.

Conclusion:

Hardy County Schools is dedicated to fostering an environment that respects and protects the rights of individuals to freely exercise their religious beliefs. This policy demonstrates our commitment to upholding the constitutional principle of religious freedom while ensuring a safe and inclusive learning environment for all members of our community. Through this policy, we aim to strike a balance between the exercise of religion and the legitimate concerns of maintaining order and respect within our schools.

SOURCE: Hardy County Board of Education Minutes

DATE: December 4, 2023

LEGAL REFERENCE: House Bill 3042