

Study about Religions in the Social Studies Curriculum

A Position Statement of National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS)

Introduction

National Council for the Social Studies re-affirms that study about religions should be an essential part of the social studies curriculum. Knowledge about religions is not only a characteristic of an educated person but is necessary for effective and engaged citizenship in a diverse nation and world. Religious literacy dispels stereotypes, promotes cross-cultural understanding, and encourages respect for the rights of others to religious liberty.

Intended Audience

This position statement is aimed at informing the general public, the K-12 community, and all educators, from pre-kindergarten through graduate school, about the importance of addressing study about religions in the social studies curriculum in ways that are constitutionally and academically sound.

Background

In the early 1960s, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled state-sponsored devotional practices unconstitutional in public schools. At the same time, however, the Court made clear that study *about* religions—as distinguished from religious indoctrination—is an important part of a good education. In *Abington v. Schempp* (1963), Associate Justice Tom Clark wrote for the Court:

[I]t might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religions or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historical qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistent with the First Amendment.¹

Despite this guidance from the Supreme Court, controversy and confusion over the role of religion in public schools led many textbook publishers and educators to avoid inclusion of study about religions in the curriculum. In the late 1980s, however, a new consensus emerged about the need to address religion in the social studies and other subjects. In 1988, NCSS joined with 16 leading educational, religious and civil liberties groups to publish a common ground statement that stated, in part:

Because religion plays a significant role in history and society, study about religion is essential to understanding both the nation and the world. Omission of facts about religion can give students the false impression that the religious life of humankind is insignificant or unimportant. Failure to understand even the basic symbols, practices, and concepts of the various religions makes much of history, literature, art, and contemporary life unintelligible.²

Over the next two decades, state social studies standards began to include more study about religions and many history textbooks began to expand their treatment of religions.³ In 2000, the U.S. Department of Education disseminated to every public school a packet of guidelines on the constitutional role of religion in public schools, including “A Teacher’s Guide to Religion in Public Schools,” endorsed by NCSS and 21 other national organizations. The guidelines underscore the critical difference between teaching of religion (religious education or indoctrination) and teaching *about* religion:

- The school’s approach to religion is *academic*, not *devotional*.
- The school strives for student *awareness* of religions, but

For the purposes of this position statement, NCSS defines social studies as the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. It includes disciplines such as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, and the humanities.

does not press for student *acceptance* of any religion.

- The school sponsors study *about* religion, not the *practice* of religion.
- The school may *expose* students to a diversity of religious views, but may not *impose* any particular view.
- The school *educates* about all religions; it does not *promote* or *denigrate* any religion.
- The school may *inform* the student about religious beliefs, but should not seek to *conform* him or her to any particular belief.⁴

Despite recent improvements in study about religions brought about by the new consensus, religious illiteracy remains widespread in the United States.⁵ Public schools can and should do more to take religion seriously in a world where religion—for better and for worse—plays a critical role in shaping events at home and abroad.

To encourage more religious studies in public schools, the American Academy of Religion (AAR) published in 2010 “Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 public schools in the United States.” Religious illiteracy that “fuels prejudice and antagonism,” the AAR states, “can be diminished by teaching about religion in public schools using a non-devotional, academic perspective.”⁶

Rationale for Recommendations and Recommendations

National Council for the Social Studies strongly supports inclusion of study about religions as an essential part of the social studies curriculum.

In public schools, the First Amendment provides the civic framework for teaching about religions in ways that are constitutionally and academically sound. Schools demonstrate a commitment to fairness and neutrality under the First Amendment when they include study about religions, wherever appropriate, in the social studies curriculum.

Preparation for citizenship in a religiously diverse country and world requires religious literacy. Study about religions combats intolerance and prepares students to engage people of different

religions and beliefs with civility and respect.

Knowledge of religions is also necessary for understanding much of history, politics, ethics, art, and literature. Study about religions in the social studies explores the religious dimension of human existence in its broader cultural context, including its relation to economic, political, and social institutions, as well as its relation to the arts, geography, language, and literature.

Study about religions may take place in special courses and units or wherever and whenever knowledge of the religious dimension of history and culture is needed for balanced and comprehensive understanding.

NCSS recommends that state departments of education work to ensure inclusion of study about religions, including the role of religion in history and society, in all social studies programs. NCSS also supports course offerings in religious studies as long as the teachers teaching such courses have appropriate academic training in study about religions.

In order to take religious studies seriously, NCSS recommends that every public school district adopt clear First Amendment policies and guidelines on teaching about religions developed with broad involvement and support of the community. Through in-service programs, administrators and teachers must be prepared to carry out these policies. Parents and students should be informed about why and how the school is teaching about religions.

NCSS recommends that teacher education institutions expose prospective teachers to the constitutional framework for addressing religion in the curriculum. In addition, prospective social studies teachers should be encouraged to take at least one course in religious studies as part of their certification.

NCSS further recommends that state departments of education review social studies frameworks, setting standards for religious studies courses and the inclusion of study about religions where appropriate.

Finally, NCSS recommends that if there are to be courses in religious studies, there must be teachers competent to teach them.

Implementation

NCSS urges state education leaders, textbook publishers, and

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teacher educators to strengthen study about religions in public schools by acting on the recommendations contained in this statement.

NCSS members are encouraged to use this position statement to urge state departments of education and local school districts to adopt policies and practices for study about religions consistent with high academic standards for religious studies and First Amendment principles.

Conclusion

In the 21st century, religious literacy is essential for understanding the role of religion in public life, negotiating differences in the public square, and forging public policies that serve the common good. That's why schools have a civic and educational responsibility to include robust study about religions in the social studies curriculum. Only through learning about religions and beliefs will young people be adequately prepared for citizenship in a religiously diverse society and world.

National Council for the Social Studies has long led the call for inclusion of study about religions in the curriculum in ways that are both constitutionally and academically sound. With

this position statement, NCSS renews that call by reminding Americans that the strength of our lively experiment in building one nation of many peoples and faiths depends in no small measure on understanding one another across differences that are often deep and abiding. 🌐

Notes

1. *Abington School District v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963).
2. "Religion in the Public School Curriculum: Questions and Answers" was first published in 1988 and disseminated widely by NCSS and other sponsoring organizations. The full document may be found at www.religiousfreedomcenter.org.
3. Susan L. Douglass, *Teaching about Religion in National and State Standards* (Nashville, Tenn.: Council on Islamic Education and First Amendment Center, 2000).
4. Based on guidelines originally published by the Public Education Religion Studies Center at Wright State University. The complete text of "A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools" may be found at www.religiousfreedomcenter.org. For all consensus guidelines on religion in public schools, see: Charles C. Haynes and Oliver Thomas, *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Schools* (Nashville, Tenn.: First Amendment Center, 2007).
5. "U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey," Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2010); See also, Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know-And Doesn't* (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperOne, 2007).
6. For the full text of the American Academy of Religion's guidelines, see <https://www.aarweb.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Publications/epublications/AARK-12CurriculumGuidelines.pdf>.

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