

Teaching About Religion

It is a common misperception that educators cannot teach about religion in schools, especially public schools. In fact, the National Council for the Social Studies states that “knowledge about religions is not only a characteristic of an educated person, but is absolutely necessary for understanding and living in a world of diversity.” However, educators must be sure to distinguish between teaching religion and teaching *about* religion. As educators, we have a responsibility to provide students with a secular, non-biased understanding of the different religions they will encounter in society. Our goal must always be fostering respectful attitudes towards all faiths, not to proselytize or advocate for any specific belief.

Teaching about religion:

- Approaches the topic of religion in an academic, non-devotional, non-biased way.
- Raises student awareness of the beliefs and practices of different religions without imposing any particular point of view or pressing students to accept any one religion.
- Investigates the role of religion in history, current events, music, art, and literature without promoting or denigrating any religion.
- Informs students about different religious beliefs without making them conform to any particular belief.

Things to remember when teaching about religion:

- Link discussions of religion to other educational goals, such as the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies or Common Core ELA-Literacy standards.
- Never participate in any religious services, ceremonies, or rituals in the presence of students.
- Avoid projects in which students preach their own faith or criticize the faith of others.
- Do not communicate your own personal religious, non-religious, or spiritual beliefs with your students.

Teaching about religion in an inclusive way:

- Anchor discussions about religion and social identity in a common vocabulary that everyone in the classroom understands.
- Encourage students to ask each other questions about their understanding of, and experiences with, religion.
- Avoid generalizing statements about entire religious traditions or statements that attribute agency to traditions and texts rather than the people who live and interpret them.
- Address the ways religion is implicated in histories of inequality and injustice.
- Use diverse and unbiased resources that celebrate different religions without attacking others. Give equal attention to majority, minority, and non-belief traditions.
- Remind students that whether someone is religious or non-religious, all people have the capacity to live by moral or ethical standards of behavior.

Resources for Teaching About Religion

Tanenbaum lesson plans and curricula:

Our internationally recognized [Seven Principles for Inclusive Education](#) provide foundational practices for teaching about religion in an inclusive way. Be sure to also check out:

- Our [Religions in My Neighborhood](#) curriculum (now available in its second edition as a free download!)
- Our [Religious Diversity in the Classroom](#) webinar series, produced in partnership with Teaching Tolerance (now Learning for Justice)
- Our [Religion, Social Studies, and You](#) webinar series, produced in partnership with the National Council for the Social Studies
- Our stand-alone [lesson plans](#) for Grades K-12, especially:
 - [Exploring Beliefs about Religious Differences](#) (Grades K-6)
 - [Rituals and Traditions about Light: Hopefulness and Waiting](#) (Grades K-6)
 - [Learning from Religious Differences](#) (Grades K-6)
 - [Interreligious Understanding Game](#) (Grades 6-12)
 - [Respecting Each Other](#) (Grades K-12)

Further reading:

- American Academy of Religion, [Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States](#)
- First Amendment Center, [A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools](#)
- National Council for the Social Studies, [Religious Studies Companion Document to the C3 Framework](#)
- Society for Biblical Literature, [Bible Electives in Public Schools: A Guide](#)
- Louise Derman-Sparks and the A.B.C. Task-Force, [Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children](#)

For more information, please visit Tanenbaum's education webpage at <https://tanenbaum.org/programs/education/> or email education@tanenbaum.org.