

Commemorating **Religious Freedom Day** (January 16)

Each year, the President declares January 16th to be “Religious Freedom Day,” and calls upon Americans to “observe this day through appropriate events and activities in homes, schools, and places of worship.” It is the anniversary of the passage, in 1786, of the Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom. Thomas Jefferson drafted the legislation and considered it one of his greatest achievements. It stopped the practice of taxing people to pay for the support of the local clergy, and it protected the civil rights of people to express their religious beliefs without suffering discrimination.

The men who drafted the U.S. Constitution leaned heavily on Jefferson’s statute in establishing the First Amendment’s guarantee of religious freedom.

Today, that protection is as important as ever. In too many instances, public school teachers tell students they cannot include their faith in their homework assignments or classroom discussions.

The U.S. Department of Education has issued guidelines explaining students’ religious liberties. Talking about religious liberties (especially explaining students’ liberties to parents) will make an administrator’s job easier because it will clarify that schools need not be “religion free zones.” It is often the case that parents who complain to school officials about what they think are violations of the separation of church and state do not understand the appropriate and lawful place religious expression can have at school.

The Message of Religious Freedom Day

Religious Freedom Day is not “celebrate-our-diversity day.” Freedom means the freedom to disagree (respectfully). The main message students need to hear is that they shouldn't feel like they have to be “undercover” about their religion...that somehow they have to be “hush-hush” about their family's beliefs.

Commemoration Ideas

In commemorating the day, a school could have an assembly or could ask teachers to recognize it in their classrooms. Either way, here are some ideas for acknowledging Religious Freedom Day at your school:

1. Read the Presidential Proclamation. You will find this at www.whitehouse.gov. At the White House Web site, enter a search for “Religious Freedom Day.” If the current proclamation is not posted in time for you to use it in class, consider using the previous year's proclamation.
2. Have students write a paper on “What religious freedom means to me.”
3. Distribute to students copies of the U.S. Department of Education’s guidelines on students’ religious liberties. If you did nothing else to commemorate Religious Freedom Day, this alone would do more to promote real freedom at your school. You could also write a letter to parents and staple it to the guidelines. The letter can introduce Religious Freedom Day and convey, “Our school is a safe place

for your child to express your family’s religious faith.” (Visit www.religiousfreedomday.com to print a copy of the U.S. Department of Education’s guidelines on students’ religious liberties.)

4. Talk about countries where freedom of religion is not allowed. For research on this, visit www.freedomhouse.org/religion.
5. Distribute and discuss the *Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom* drafted by Thomas Jefferson. (January 16 is the anniversary of the passage of this statute). For a copy of the statute, and an easier-to-read paraphrase of this document, visit www.religiousfreedomday.com.

Students’ Religious Liberties

Freedom of speech can take different forms. It includes what you say to other people as well as your freedom to speak to God in prayer; it includes what you write in school assignments or what you create in an art class; it includes the words you give to a friend either by speaking or in writing. The information below comes from the U.S. Department of Education’s document *Guidance on Constitutionally Protected Prayer in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools (February 7, 2003)*

Although, the document’s title implies it only focuses on student prayer, it includes more topics. Here is a summary of the U.S. Department of Education’s guidelines on students’ religious freedom.

1. Students can pray, read their Bibles, and talk about their faith at school during school hours.
2. Students can organize prayer groups and Bible studies and announce their meetings.
3. Students can express their faith in their class work and homework.
4. Teachers can organize prayer groups and Bible studies with their colleagues.
5. Students *may* be able to go off campus to have a Bible study during school hours.
6. Students can express their faith at a school event.
7. Students can express their faith at their graduation ceremony.

For a one-page (two-sided) student-friendly version of the guidelines you can distribute and discuss in class, visit www.religiousfreedomday.com.