

## **"God's Place in the Public School"** **by Angela Powell**

*This is web-exclusive content.*

Is it okay to use worksheets with dreidels on them?

What do I tell a student who asked about my W.W.J.D. bracelet?

The kids tease a Muslim student who covers her head--what do I say?

I have to teach the kids a science concept I disagree with--help!

These are some common issues that most teachers in public schools face--whether they consider themselves religious or not. Click on a question to follow the link to the source of my paraphrased answer. All responses come directly from the U.S. Department of Education or from sites which quote the Department of Education specifically.

### Is it okay to display holiday decorations with religious symbols in the classroom?

No--religious decorations are not allowed in public school classrooms under federal law in the United States. They may be used as teaching aids during lessons, but not displayed even seasonally as part of your decor. The Christmas tree and Hanukah menorah have been declared 'secularized' by the Supreme Court, but have not been specifically sanctioned for display in the public school setting. Be very careful with this (see the next question for guidelines about using holiday symbols in lessons). Most teachers assume that as long as they represent all the major religions, it's okay to display the symbols, but if a parent were ever to challenge them, there would be no legal backing.

I stay away from holiday symbols completely, although I used to play a game called 'Math Tree' with students on the last day of school before winter break. It's an evergreen drawn with little circles on it. Each student gets a copy and writes a number within a set range I give. Then I called out math facts; if students have the answers to the fact given, they get to color in the circle with the corresponding number. After 20 facts are called, the person with the most circles colored wins. Because the Christmas tree has been declared secularized and I don't call it a Christmas tree, anyway, it's technically okay. (And, it's a great way to get some math practice in on a day when the kids are bouncing off the walls!).

### Can I teach students about Christmas and Hanukah?

Teach about, yes. Celebrate, no. You may display symbols of religious holidays as part of your lesson, provided you teach about multiple religious traditions and do not endorse any particular one. This can be difficult to do fairly and sensitively, especially when we have so much other content to teach as it is--that's why so many teachers just tape some snowflakes up on the window and pretend like December is any other month. (Those look ridiculous, by the way, when displayed on a window overlooking palm trees on an 80 degree day, so I don't hang anything! 😊)

### Can I wear religious symbols or clothing?

This is a gray area that is largely decided by individual states. However, you can wear something discreet such as a necklace that indicates your faith. Clothing is very rocky territory and not a good area to be bold. Think about it--how would you feel if everyday your child's teacher wore t-shirts and jewelry with religious messages that you disagreed with?

### Can I share my religious views with students?

No. And federal laws really aren't clear about how you can explain any religious symbols you wear. If a child asks about your religious jewelry, you can say that you wear the symbol because it's an important part of your religion. Some sources say it's okay to then discuss more if the child asks; others say you can't even give a one-sentence explanation of what it symbolizes. This stipulation makes sense, because children are curious and impressionable; we can't have them

being indoctrinated at every turn, especially within a public school setting. If a child asked me about my bracelet with the fruit of the Spirit on it (which hasn't happened so far), I would repeat the line mentioned above, and if they asked any more questions, I would direct them to ask their parents if they had any other questions. Ideally, I would then contact the parents by phone and tell them their child had asked questions about what my jewelry stood for and what my reply was.

#### Can I participate in a prayer group at my school?

Yes, you can participate in after-hours activities as long as it is clear that you are there as an individual and not as a school representative, and that your school is not endorsing the activity.

#### Can I teach about creationism, too, or just evolution?

In most school districts, the answer here is NO, and that saddens me greatly. The majority of Americans--and the majority of people internationally, across time and culture--believe that the universe was created by a higher being of some sort, yet this concept cannot be brought up in a public school classroom. What's more, evolutionary thinking MUST be taught--it's not like religious holidays that we can just avoid--we HAVE to teach it if it's in our curriculum!

Creationism can be mentioned in comparative religion classes when analyzing how religious groups believe the world began, but it can't be presented as fact. 'Creation Science' is said not to fit the definition of basic scientific tenets and therefore should not be brought up in science classes. When my students ask questions about creationism, I say, "I'm sorry, I would love to tell you what I believe about that, but I'm not allowed to because I'm your teacher. Teachers are supposed to give their students only facts about this topic so that kids can make up their own minds. If you want to know more, you can ask your parents, or someone at your church or temple or synagogue."

Personally I think it's important to expose children to different belief systems, just like we do with the holidays and teaching about religion, but the powers that be say we must treat science differently. Several states are fighting this right now. And there are some sources which say it's okay to discuss creation science as part of an objective overview in any public school in America- but I see this as extremely dangerous territory.

(By the way, if the concept of intelligent design seems completely irrational to you, or if you believe in it but want to know more about how to defend your beliefs, here are some websites worth checking out: scientists who believe the Bible and science can be fully integrated, answers to the question, where's the proof for Creationism?, and explanations for specific Creationist claims. You can find many more resources by doing a simple search engine run with the keyword 'creationism').

#### What should I do if I have to teach something I disagree with?

I read lots of nonfiction books to my kids, and I am amazed at the secular propaganda that completely permeates children's literature. I've found the best approach is to read the text as it is for two reasons: a) because children have a right to learn about commonly-believed scientific explanations, and b) so kids can learn how to think critically about messages they receive from the media. Whenever I encounter something that conflicts with creationism, I usually add a sidebar to the discussion. For example, I'll say, "This book tells us that reptiles have been around for 2.5 million years and may have evolved from fish. Not all scientists agree that the earth is that old, and not all scientists believe that different species of animals evolved from other animals. Remember that scientists are always discovering new information. When you grow up, you can be a scientist and help us discover the truth about the history of our planet."

Evolution, which is a separate topic from the origin of life, is a part of our third grade science curriculum. It also comes up repeatedly as we read fables and study both space and landforms. The origin of the universe is not part of our third grade curriculum, but it's a topic that the kids really want to talk about. Normally when kids bring it up, I tell them that different people believe different things, and ask them to share what they know. We can then discuss that some people believe that the universe was created without a God, and some people believe that God did it.

My students have asked some extremely profound questions. Some of my favorites, along with the response I gave:

#### **Q: Were Adam and Eve before the cavemen, or were THEY cavemen?**

A: When you say 'cavemen', you really mean people who lived in prehistoric times: people who lived before any kind of writing

was invented. You mean the very first people on earth. Some people believe that God created the earth, and the first people He created were a man called Adam and a woman called Eve. That's what the Bible tells us. If that's your belief, then yes, I would say Adam and Eve were prehistoric people, and they might have lived like you imagine cave people living.

**Q: Our book says erosion made the Grand Canyon, but my Sunday School teacher said God did--is she wrong?**

A: People believe lots of different things about how the earth got to be the way it is today. No one who was on the earth that long ago is still alive to day to tell us! So we have to depend on what scientists discover in their research, and on papers and books written by people who lived a long time ago. Some people believe that the earth formed features like the Grand Canyon without any kind of god doing anything; other people believe that God caused the water to flow a certain way and that's what made the features. The author of this book seems to believe that the earth was formed without God. Your Sunday School teacher probably believes the earth was formed with God. You can make your own decision about what you believe.

**Q: If God didn't make people, then how was the first person born?**

A: People who don't believe in God have been trying to figure this out for a long time! They have some theories--some ideas based on research--but nothing has been proven. Just like people who DO believe in God can't prove that God created people.

Why do we have a 'moment of silence'? Can students pray in school?

Schools can have moments of silence if they wish, but can't encourage or discourage students to use the time to pray. Personally I have never seen this 'moment' used effectively--primary students have no idea why they are standing there and it's a complete waste of time. I have taught in a school that used the moment of silence, and I talked with my kids about using the time to pray if you believe in God, or meditate (think about good things), or to repeat an affirmation to yourself, such as, "I'm going to try my best in everything I do today". Students can always pray on their own--never with teacher or administrative guidance--whenever regular conversation would be appropriate.

What should I do if a child writes or draws about going to synagogue or praying?

It's fine! Grade it based on academic content, with no penalty or award based upon the religious content.