

Educator Guide to Religion and Religious Observations

The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution both prohibits the government from endorsing any particular religion and safeguards the freedom of religious practices and expressions, shielding them from unjust government intrusion and bias.

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution established the separation of church and state, which means that public schools cannot promote or endorse any particular religion.

Virginia public schools must remain neutral concerning religion. School officials, including teachers and administrators, cannot promote or favor any particular religion over others, nor can they compel students to participate in religious activities or prayers. However, students have the right to engage in voluntary, student-led prayer or religious activities as long as they do not disrupt the educational environment or coerce others to participate.

Virginia public schools' curriculum may include religious topics, but these courses must be taught in an objective and secular manner. The focus of the coursework must be the academic study of religion, its impact on our shared history, culture, and society, rather than promoting any particular religious beliefs.

Arlington Public Schools is committed to celebrating religious diversity. The purpose of this document is to provide our community of educators with a general understanding of the core beliefs, practices, rituals, and traditions of the major religions of our community. While this guidance is not meant to be exhaustive, it will provide each APS teacher, school counselor, and administrator with the information they need to support the students we jointly serve.

By offering general core tenets and descriptions of common religious practices and observations, the APS office of diversity, equity, and inclusion aims to create and maintain an inclusive environment that values, affirms, and respects the religious identities of all students and staff. We expect that utilization of this guidance will contribute to fostering inclusive learning and working environments across settings.

It is important to remember that religious observations vary widely depending on the specific faith and its traditions. Specific practices within each religion may vary depending on the sect, denomination, and cultural context. It is essential that APS work to recognize and respect the diversity that exists within and between religious traditions. APS Policy A-3 Nondiscrimination states that "Discrimination, including harassment,

based on race, national origin, creed, color, religion, gender, age, economic status, sexual orientation, marital status, pregnancy status, genetic information, gender identity or expression, veteran status, disability, and/or any other protected class is prohibited. No individual who participated in or attends any Arlington Public Schools program or activity occurring during or outside of school hours shall be excluded from participation in, denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination on any of the above-listed bases.”

Prayer in Schools

§ 22.1-203.1. Student-initiated prayer.

In order that the right of every pupil to the free exercise of religion be guaranteed within the schools and that the freedom of each individual pupil not be subject to pressure from the Commonwealth either to engage in, or to refrain from, religious observation on school grounds, consistent with constitutional principles of freedom of religion and separation of church and state, students in the public schools may voluntarily engage in student-initiated prayer. 1994, c. 799.

Religious Dress

§ 22.1-279.6. Board of Education guidelines and model practices for codes of student conduct; school board regulations.

Any dress or grooming code included in a school board’s code of student conduct or otherwise adopted by a school board shall (i) permit any student to wear any religiously and ethnically specific or significant head covering or hairstyle, including hijabs, yarmulkes, headwraps, braids, locs, and cornrows.

The office of DEI provides the following as general core tenants and descriptions of common religious practices and observations:

Buddhism

“At the heart of Buddhism, a profound philosophy and way of life, stands for the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. These teachings form the core of Buddhist wisdom, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding the nature of suffering and the path to liberation.”

Tenants:

The Four Noble Truths: The Diagnosis of Suffering

1. **Dukkha (Suffering):** The first truth acknowledges the reality of suffering in human existence. This suffering, referred to as dukkha, encompasses not only physical pain but also the broader sense of dissatisfaction, impermanence, and the existential unease that pervades life.
2. **Samudaya (Origin):** The second truth delves into the causes of suffering. It identifies attachment, craving, and ignorance as the roots of suffering. Attachment to desires, aversion to unpleasant experiences, and the delusion of permanence are highlighted as the sources of our discontent.
3. **Nirodha (Cessation):** The third truth offers hope by proclaiming that suffering can be overcome. Nirodha, or cessation, is the end of craving, attachment, and ignorance. It is the possibility of liberation from the cycle of suffering and rebirth.
4. **Magga (Path):** The fourth truth presents the path to liberation. The Eightfold Path is outlined as a means to achieve the cessation of suffering and attain enlightenment.

The Eightfold Path: The Journey to Enlightenment

1. Sila (Ethical Conduct):
 - a. Right Speech: Avoiding lies, divisive speech, harsh speech, and idle chatter.
 - b. Right Action: Abstaining from harming other people, stealing, and sexual misconduct.
 - c. Right Livelihood: Engaging in an occupation that is honorable and non-harmful.
2. Samadhi (mental Development):
 - a. Right Effort: Cultivating a wholesome state of mind and eliminating unwholesome states.
 - b. Right Mindfulness Developing awareness of bodily sensations, feelings, thoughts, and mental states.
 - c. Right Concentration: Cultivating a focused and tranquil state of mind through meditation.
3. Panna (Wisdom):
 - a. Right View: Developing a correct understanding of the nature of reality, impermanence, and the Four Noble Truths.
 - b. Right Intention: Cultivating intentions of renunciation, non-ill will, and non-harm.

Practices and Observations:

- **Meditation:** Practiced regularly by Buddhists, with variations such as mindfulness meditation.
- **Vesak (Buddha Purnima):** Celebrates the birth, enlightenment, and death of Buddha.
- **Monastic Observances:** Monks and nuns follow a disciplined life with regular rituals and meditative practices.

Christianity

Central Beliefs in Christianity: Trinity, Salvation, and Afterlife

“Christianity, with its diverse traditions and interpretations, is united by a core set of beliefs that provide a foundation for the faith’s theology, ethics, and worldview. Among these central beliefs are the concepts of the Trinity, salvation, and the afterlife, which offer insights into the nature of God, the purpose of human existence, and the ultimate destiny of the soul.” David M. Eaton

Core Beliefs:

1. The Trinity: One God in Three Persons
 - a. The belief that God exists as three distinct by inseparable persons: God the Father, God the Son (Jesus Christ), and God the Holy Spirit.
2. Salvation: Redemption and Grace
 - a. Representing the reconciliation of humanity with God through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.
3. Afterlife: Eternal Destiny
 - a. Christianity teaches that human existence extends beyond this earthly life.

Practices and Observations:

- Sunday Worship: Many Christian denominations observe a weekly gathering for worship on Sundays.
- Eucharist or Communion: The practice of sharing bread and wine to symbolize the body and blood of Christ.
- Lent: A period of fasting, repentance, and prayer leading up to Easter.
- Easter: Celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.
- Christmas: The celebration of Christ’s birth.

Hinduism

Core Beliefs:

“Hinduism is a profound and intricate belief system. Among these beliefs, three stand out prominently: Dharma, Karma, and Moksha. These concepts not only shape the moral compass of Hindu followers but also offer profound philosophical insights that have intrigued scholars and seekers for centuries.” David M.Eaton

1. **Dharma:** The Cosmic Order and Moral Duty
2. **Karma:** The Law of Cause and Effect
3. **Moksha:** Liberation and Spiritual Fulfillment

Practices and Observances:

- Daily Puja: Rituals and prayers performed at home or in temples.
- Festivals: Diwali, Holi, Navaratri, and others, each with its own rituals and celebrations.
- Pilgrimages: Visits to holy sites such as Varanasi, Kumbh Mela, and others.

Islam

“The Five Pillars of Islam serve as a practical framework for Muslims. These practices cultivate spiritual growth, communal solidarity, and ethical conduct.” David M. Eaton

Muslim beliefs:

- Belief in one God (Allah)
- Belief in the Angels
- Belief in the holy books sent to all the prophets:
 - Torah that was revealed to the prophet Moses.
 - Bible that was revealed to the prophet Jesus
 - Qur'an (Koran) that was revealed to the prophet Muhammad.

- Belief in all the prophets sent by God including Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Although Muslims believe in Isa or Jesus they don't think of Jesus as the Son of God the way Christians do.
- Belief in the Day of Judgement and life after death. The best reward for performing good deeds is getting closer to God.
- Belief in divine decree. This means that God is all-powerful and nothing can happen without His permission, however, he has given human beings freedom to choose whether to be good or bad. In the end, everyone will be questioned about how they lived in their life.

United Religions Initiative, 2024

The Five Pillars of Islam: Cornerstones of Muslim Faith and Practice

1. Shahada (Faith Declaration): Declaration of faith in Islam "La ilaha illallah, Muhammadur rasulullah" (There is no god but Allah, and Muhamad is the Messenger of Allah.)
2. Salat (Prayer): Mandatory act of worship. Observed five times each day as a way for Muslims to maintain a strong connection with Allah and serve as a reminder of their submission to Him. The Salat are prescribed to occur at the following times:
 - a. Fajr: Before dawn.
 - b. Dhuhr: After midday.
 - c. Asr: Mid-afternoon.
 - d. Maghrib: Just after sunset.
 - e. Isha: Nighttime
3. Zakat (Charitable Giving)
4. Swam (Fasting during Ramadan)
5. Hajj (Pilgrimage to Mecca)

Practices and Observances:

- Five Daily Prayers (Salah): Muslims are required to pray at specific times throughout the day facing the Kaaba in Mecca.
- Fasting during Ramadan: Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan.
- Hajj: A pilgrimage to Mecca that every Muslim who is physically and financially able is required to undertake at least once in their lifetime.

Islam: Celebrations and Festivals

Id ul-Fitr

- This festival marks the end of the month of fasting, Ramadan. It ends with the sighting of the new moon in the sky. Muslims visit their mosque to say special prayers, visit friends and relatives, eat special feast foods and exchange gifts and cards. It is a time of thankfulness for Allah's blessings which are better appreciated because of the experience of fasting during Ramadan.

Judaism

"Judaism is a monotheistic religion, believing in one god. It is not a racial group. Individuals may also associate or identify with Judaism primarily through ethnic or cultural characteristics. Jewish communities may differ in belief, practice, politics, geography, language, and autonomy." The United States Holocaust Museum

"Judaism is defined by its foundational beliefs, practices, and the stories that shape its identity. Two central aspects that have profoundly influenced Jewish thought, history, and culture, are the Covenant with Abraham and the significance of the Torah." David M. Eaton

Practices and Observances:

- **Sabbath (Shabbat):** The weekly day of rest, typically observed from Friday Evening to Saturday evening.
- **Passover (Pesach):** Commemorate the liberation of the Israelites from slavery Egypt.
- **Kashrut (Dietary Laws):** Kosher dietary laws specify what foods are permitted (kosher) and what is forbidden (non-kosher). This includes rules about which animals are fit for consumption, how they should be slaughtered, and the separation of meat and dairy products.
- **Yom Kippur:** The Day of Atonement, a day of fasting, prayer, and repentance.
- **Bar/Bat Mitzvah:** Coming of age ceremony for Jewish boys (Bar Mitzvah) at age 13 and girls (Bat Mitzvah) at age 12, symbolizing their responsibility for observing Jewish commandments and participating in the community.
- **Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year):** One of the holiest days in the Jewish calendar. Usually falls in September or October and marks the beginning of the High Holy Days or Ten Days of Repentance, which culminate in Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). Symbolic foods, apples dipped in honey (for a sweet new year) and challah bread (symbolizing the cycle of the year). Meaning "head of the year" or "first of the year," the festival begins on the first day of Tishrei, the seventh month of the Hebrew calendar, which falls during September or October.

Rosh Hashanah commemorates the creation of the world and marks the beginning of the Days of Awe, a 10-day period of introspection and repentance that culminates in the Yom Kippur holiday, also known as the Day of Atonement. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the two “High Holy Days” in the Jewish religion.

- Considerations:

- Consider avoiding assignments, deadlines, and exams on the day after the holiday.
- Students may be focused on introspection, repentance, and prayer during this holiday.
- Synagogue services may be longer during this holiday.

- **Hanukkah (Festival of Lights):** Celebration commemorating the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem during the second century BCE, after the Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucid Empire lasting eight nights and days. Hanukkah begins on the 25th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev, which typically falls in December on the Gregorian calendar.

Holiday/Observance	Explanation and Customs	Guidance for Staff
Rosh Hashanah	<p>Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, is one of Judaism’s holiest days. Meaning “head of the year” or “first of the year,” the festival begins on the first day of Tishrei, the seventh month of the Hebrew calendar, which falls during September or October. Rosh Hashanah commemorates the creation of the world and marks the beginning of the Days of Awe, a 10-day period of introspection and repentance that culminates in the Yom Kippur holiday, also known as the Day of Atonement. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the two “High Holy Days” in the Jewish religion.</p> <p>Source: https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/rosh-hashanah-history</p>	<p>Synagogue services may be longer during this holiday.</p> <p>Students may be focused on introspection, repentance, and prayer during this holiday.</p> <p>Note that the holiday begins at sunset, day 1 is the following day and day 2 is the day after that.</p> <p>Consider avoiding assignments, deadlines, and exams on day 1 and day 2.</p>

Yom Kippur	<p>Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement—is considered the most important holiday in the Jewish faith. Falling in the month of Tishrei (September or October in the Gregorian calendar), it marks the culmination of the 10 Days of Awe, a period of introspection and repentance that follows Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. The holiday is observed with a 25-hour fast and a special religious service. Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah are known as Judaism’s “High Holy Days.”</p> <p>Source: https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/yom-kippur-history</p>	<p>Note that the holiday begins at sunset and continues through the following day, so consider this when assigning homework during this time. Consider avoiding assignments, deadlines, and exams on the day of observance.</p> <p>Also note that students may be fasting during this time and may not be able to complete assignments as they normally would.</p> <p>Students may refrain from attending classes, studying, or participating in school-related extracurricular activities.</p> <p>Students’ energy level, concentration, and mood may be impacted by fasting for the entire day.</p>
Diwali	<p>Diwali (also called Divali or Deepavali) is a “festival of lights” that celebrates the triumph of light over dark and good over evil, and the blessings of victory, freedom, and enlightenment. The name comes from Sanskrit dipavali, meaning “row of lights.” On the night of Diwali, celebrants light dozens of candles and clay lamps (called diyas), placing them throughout their homes and in the streets to light up the dark night.</p> <p>Diwali is primarily celebrated by followers of the Hindu, Sikh, and Jain faiths. However, the holiday is celebrated throughout India, Singapore, and several other South Asian countries as a national holiday, meaning that people outside these religions may participate in Diwali celebrations, too.</p> <p>Source: https://www.almanac.com/content/diwali</p>	<p>Note that families will be observing during the day and evening so consider this when assigning homework due to the following day.</p> <p>Students might find it difficult to focus on their studies during this time due to excitement and celebrations and the festive atmosphere associated with the Festival of Lights.</p> <p>Students may be influenced by the themes of reflection, gratitude, and values of compassion and generosity during Diwali.</p>

Hanukkah	<p>The eight-day Jewish celebration known as Hanukkah or Chanukah commemorates the rededication during the second century B.C. of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, where according to legend Jews had risen up against their Greek-Syrian oppressors in the Maccabean Revolt. Hanukkah, which means “dedication” in Hebrew, begins on the 25th of Kislev on the Hebrew calendar and usually falls in November or December. Often called the Festival of Lights, the holiday is celebrated with the lighting of the menorah, traditional foods, games and gifts.</p> <p>The Hanukkah celebration revolves around the kindling of a nine-branched menorah, known in Hebrew as the hanukiah. On each of the holiday’s eight nights, another candle is added to the menorah after sundown; the ninth candle, called the shamash (“helper”), is used to light the others. Jews typically recite blessings during this ritual and display the menorah prominently in a window as a reminder to others of the miracle that inspired the holiday.</p> <p>Source: https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/hanukkah</p>	<p>Please consider that families may be observing this during this time, but students do not typically miss school.</p> <p>Students would benefit from flexibility with assignments and deadlines to accommodate for observance of family celebrations.</p>
Christmas	<p>Christmas is celebrated on December 25 and is both a sacred religious holiday and a worldwide cultural and commercial phenomenon. Christians celebrate Christmas Day as the anniversary of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, not just a spiritual leader but the central figure, believed to be the Son of God, the Messiah whose role forms the basis of their religion. Popular customs include exchanging gifts, decorating Christmas trees, attending church, sharing meals with</p>	<p>Please consider that families may be observing this during the winter break.</p>

	<p>family and friends and waiting for Santa Claus to arrive.</p> <p>Source: https://www.history.com/topics/christmas/history-of-christmas </p>	
Kwanzaa	<p>The name Kwanzaa is derived from the phrase “matunda ya kwanza” which means “first fruits” in Swahili. Each family celebrates Kwanzaa in its own way, but celebrations often include songs and dances, African drums, storytelling, poetry reading, and a large traditional meal. On each of the seven nights, the family gathers and a child lights one of the candles on the Kinara (candleholder), then one of the seven principles is discussed. The principles, called the Nguzo Saba (seven principles in Swahili) are values of African culture which contribute to building and reinforcing community among African-Americans. Kwanzaa also has seven basic symbols which represent values and concepts reflective of African culture.</p> <p>Source: https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/kwanzaa-history </p>	Please consider that families may be observing this during the winter break.
Ramadan	<p>Ramadan is a holy month of fasting, introspection and prayer for Muslims, the followers of Islam. The start of Ramadan is based on the sighting of the new crescent moon, so its precise date can vary. It is celebrated as the month during which Muhammad received the initial revelations of the Quran, the holy book for Muslims. Fasting is one of the five fundamental principles of Islam. Each day during Ramadan, Muslims</p>	Please note that students and staff will be fasting during the daylight hours, and this may impact their energy or engagement both in and out of school. Students also should be provided with a dedicated, quiet space to pray during the school day.

	<p>do not eat or drink from dawn to sunset. They are also supposed to avoid impure thoughts and bad behavior.</p> <p>Muslims break their daily fasts by sharing meals with family and friends, and the end of Ramadan is celebrated with a three-day festival known as Eid al-Fitr, one of Islam’s major holidays.</p> <p>Source: https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/ramadan </p>	
Easter	<p>Easter is a Christian holiday that celebrates the belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the New Testament of the Bible, the event is said to have occurred three days after Jesus was crucified by the Romans and died in roughly 30 A.D. The holiday concludes the “Passion of Christ,” a series of events and holidays that begins with Lent—a 40-day period of fasting, prayer and sacrifice—and ends with Holy Week, which includes Holy Thursday (the celebration of Jesus’ Last Supper with his 12 Apostles, Good Friday (on which Jesus’ crucifixion is observed) and Easter Sunday.</p> <p>https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/history-of-easter</p>	<p>Please consider that families may be observing this during the weekend.</p> <p>Please note that staff and students who may observe the 40-day period of fasting, prayer and sacrifice, may be fasting during the day. This may impact their energy or engagement both in and out of school. Students also should be provided with a dedicated, quiet space to pray during the school day if requested.</p>
Passover	<p>Passover, or Pesach in Hebrew, is one of the Jewish religion’s most sacred and widely observed holidays. In Judaism, Passover commemorates the story of the Israelites’ departure from ancient Egypt, which appears in the Hebrew Bible’s books of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, among other texts. Jews observe the weeklong festival with a number of important rituals, including a traditional Passover meal</p>	<p>Please consider that students may not be eating their typical foods during this time as they observe.</p> <p>Please avoid scheduling proms or special events on the first and second nights, as that is when most families hold their seders.</p>

	<p>known as a seder, the removal of leavened products from their home, the substitution of matzo for bread and the retelling of the exodus tale</p> <p>Source: https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/passover </p>	
Eid Al-Fitr	<p>The religious festival Eid al-Fitr, or the “Festival of Breaking the Fast,” is one of two major holidays celebrated by Muslims around the world. Eid al-Fitr commemorates the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. An occasion for special prayers, family visits, gift-giving and charity, it takes place over one to three days, beginning on the first day of Shawwal, the 10th month in the Islamic calendar. The festival is a national holiday in many countries with large Muslim populations.</p> <p>https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/eid-al-fitr</p>	Please consider that families may be observing when you are assigning homework/deadlines.
Eid al-Adha	<p>Eid al-Adha, or the “Feast of Sacrifice,” signifies the willingness of the Prophet Ibrahim, known as Abraham in Christianity and Judaism, to sacrifice his son, Ismail as ordered by Allah. It is one of Islam’s most important holidays.</p> <p>Considered the holiest of the two Eids, the other being Eid al-Fitr, or “Festival of Breaking the Fast,” that commemorates the end of Ramadan, it is one of two major Muslim holidays celebrated across the globe each year.</p> <p>Muslim worshippers typically perform a communal prayer, or ṣalāt, at dawn on the first day of the festival, attend Mosque, donate to charities and visit with family and friends, also exchanging gifts.</p> <p>https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/eid-al-adha</p>	Please consider that families may be observing when you are assigning homework/deadlines.

Arlington Public Schools (APS) Policies and Practices

[Policy J-2 Student Equal Education Opportunities/Nondiscrimination](#)

[Policy J-6.8.1 Student Safety - Bullying/Harassment Prevention](#)

[Policy A-3 Nondiscrimination](#)

Resources:

[Jewish Holidays and Observances, Histoy.com](#)

Religions Around the World: Exploring the Beliefs of the 12 Major Faiths (Journey of Wisdom), David M. Eaton, 2023

[History.com](#)

[Almanac.com](#)