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California Three Rs

Rights, Responsibility, and Respect

*A Project of the California County Superintendents Educational
Services Association and The First Amendment Center*

Volume 5, Number 1

October 2007

Implementing a World Religions Class One California District's Experience

by

Margaret Hill, Ph.D., California Three Rs Project Lead

It is not news to educators that exploding religious diversity and deep divisions within American society over values has strongly impacted public schools in every way from curriculum to calendar, and dress codes to cafeteria menus. Issue after issue arises; voices are raised; angry words are exchanged. What makes all this more difficult is that people have little knowledge about world religions. They can't anticipate or don't understand why there are differences in perspective, culture, and expectations. Media emphasis on extremist views further polarizes society and with that the school community.

People with deeply differing but strongly held beliefs will never agree on all the values by which society and its schools should operate. They can, however, agree to the shared civic understandings that form the basis of our social compact...our Constitution. The rights guaranteed there are the rights of all, majority and minority, secular and religious. The Constitution can provide the framework around which procedures for dealing with deep differences can be built. When knowledge of the world's major beliefs systems is added, the chance to build the understanding and empathy that supports respect for the differences protected by the Constitution is greatly enhanced. The increasing culture conflicts in today's pluralistic society underscore the need for this understanding and respect.

At least one school district in California has tried to meet this challenge. Since 2000, the Modesto City Schools have been engaged in one of the nation's boldest and most direct experiments to promote religious liberty by helping students understand religious diversity. The school district has instituted a required nine-week course in world religions at the ninth grade. The success of this effort has been recorded in a study by Emile Lester at William and Mary College and his colleague Patrick S. Roberts called *Learning About World Religions in Public Schools*. The researchers asked two essential questions that involved critical sub issues:

Should robust discussions of world religions take place in public schools?

- * Is it possible to construct a curriculum and teach about religion in public schools in an effective and neutral manner?
- * Can world religions courses help students to be more respectful of religious liberty and diversity?
- * Are curriculum administrators and teachers capable of putting aside their own religious views to discuss various religions in a fair and balanced manner?
- * Will teaching students about a variety of religions encourage religious and moral relativism?

Is a world religions course with an emphasis on respect for religious diversity possible to implement in a religiously and politically divided community?

The researchers interviewed 400 students as well as schools administrators, teachers, school board members and leaders in the religious community. Here is what they found:

Modesto's world religions course had a positive impact on student respect for religious liberty.

Students also showed more support for basic First Amendment rights for everyone. This included a willingness to take action when a fellow student was harassed for religious reasons and support for the rights of people with whom they disagreed to run for office, hold public meetings, etc.

Student knowledge of major Eastern and Western religions and the Bill of Rights nearly doubled.

Based on a pre- post- assessment, student knowledge of major belief systems increased dramatically. More importantly, these improvements persisted and the students affirmed the importance of this learning to their understanding of world events and cultures.

Students left the course with an increased appreciation for the similarities between major religions.

The approach to religion taken in the course was descriptive rather than comparative to ensure neutrality and avoid controversy. Students drew their own generalizations about shared values. However, the researchers found through their interviews that this increased acceptance of common moral ground did not contribute to religious relativism or encourage students to change their own religious beliefs.

Most students felt their teachers presented the religions in the course in a fair and balanced manner. However, some students felt that some teachers had not adequately emphasized the differences among the religions. This area in the study shows the need for careful professional development and selection of curriculum materials before embarking on the implementation of a world religions course.

Modesto's world religions course has not stirred up any notable controversy in the community.

The School Board adopted the course unanimously and the advisory council of religious leaders accepted and even endorsed the course. Parents were given an opt out option, but few took advantage of it.

Schools and districts throughout California would be well served to learn from the Modesto experience. The final conclusion of the researchers is that implementing a carefully crafted and taught world religions course can play a significant role in many communities in moving public schools from a culture wars battlefield to a place of common ground and open dialogue. The caution is that replicating the world religions course is not the solution. Replicating the process of working together across the religious spectrum and of involving people from the continuum of educational roles and community interest groups to plan the content, select the materials, and reflect on the outcomes is the most probable pathway toward finding common ground. A key component of the Modesto program and a major factor in its success was the solid inclusion of religious liberty principles of Rights, Responsibilities, and Respect both in the classroom and throughout the entire development and review process.

For more detailed information about the world religions curriculum and the study described above see *Learning About World Religions in Public Schools: The Impact on Student Attitudes and Community Acceptance in Modesto, California* by Emile Lester and Patrick S. Roberts available at <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/about.aspx?id=16863>.

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Learn more about the academic study of religion by participating in **Teaching About World Religions in Public Schools** in Rancho Cucamonga to be held November 7, 2007, and January 15, 2008.

For online registration, go to <http://oms.sbcss.k12.ca.us/index.php>

For information, contact: Margaret Hill, (909) 537-5459 drpeghill@verizon.net
or Anglea Dorough (909) 386-2611

San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools, California Three Rs Project and Claremont International Studies Education Project, with generous support from Holt, Rinehart & Winston
present

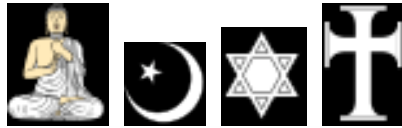
Teaching About World Religions in Public Schools

The San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools, California Three R's Project and Claremont International Studies Education Project invite classroom teachers, curriculum specialists and school administrators to learn what and how to teach about the major religions of the world in a public school setting. The California History-Social Science Content Standards include extensive coverage of world religions and the impact of religious ideas and practices. Teachers and administrators have requested academic background and teaching ideas on these topics. This 2-day workshop will feature scholar sessions on the major world religions covered in standards, paired with teacher discussions on how to apply this content in the classroom in a constitutionally permissible manner.

November 7, 2007 & January 15, 2008

San Bernardino County Supt. of Schools - West End Educational Service Center
8265 Aspen in Rancho Cucamonga
8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

\$75 per/person includes refreshments, lunch and materials



TENTATIVE AGENDA

November 7, 2007

- ☉ 3Rs Overview Teaching About Religion
- ☉ Session I Judaism
- ☉ Session II Early Christianity
- ☉ Session III Islam

January 15, 2008

- ☉ 3Rs Overview Academic Study of Religion
- ☉ Session I Buddhism
- ☉ Session II Hinduism
- ☉ Session III Confucianism/Daoism

Pre-registration is required. Registration deadline is **October 30, 2007**. No refunds after deadline.
Questions? Contact Angela Dorough at angela_dorough@sbcss.k12.ca.ua or 909-386-2611.

Online Registration: <http://oms.sbcss.k12.ca.us/index.php> or

Send registration and payment to: Rasamee Jaycox,
601 N. E Street, San Bernardino, CA 92410-3093 fax (909) 386-2667

----- World Religions -----

Name: _____ Grade(s) _____

School: _____ District: _____

School Phone: () _____ School Fax: () _____

School Address: _____ City: _____ Zip: _____

Email: _____

Method of Payment (\$75 per/person) Check (made payable to SBCSS) _____ PO (PO #) _____

Common Ground Resources:

Finding Common Ground: A Guide to Religious Liberty in Public Schools by Charles C. Haynes and Oliver Thomas. First Amendment Center, 2001.

This book has guidelines on how to handle a wide range of issues related to religious liberty and public schools.

First Amendment Center: Religious Liberty http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/rel_liberty/index.aspx

This is an up-to-the-minute resource with current issues and court cases. A PDF version of *Finding Common Ground* is available here.

For California Three Rs program information, contact...

Dr. Margaret Hill, California 3Rs Project Lead, California State University San Bernardino,
5500 University Pkwy., FO 115, San Bernardino, CA 92407, (909) 357-5459, mhill@csusb.edu

For First Amendment religious liberty information, contact...

Dr. Charles C. Haynes, First Amendment Center Senior Scholar, First Amendment Center/Arlington
1101 Wilson Blvd., Arlington, VA 22209 Tel: 703/528-0800 Fax: 703/284-3519
chaynes@freedomforum.org

For information on teaching about world religions, contact...

Dr. Bruce Grelle, Director, Religion and Public Education Resource Center, Department of Religious
Studies, California State University Chico, Chico, CA 95929-0740, (530) 898-4739,
bgrelle@csuchico.edu

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peg_hill@sbcss.k12.ca.us or access at http://score.rims.k12.ca.us/score_lessons/3rs/pages/bulletin.html