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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*

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### Displaying Religious Documents in the School and Classroom Applying the Supreme Court Decisions

by

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

In June of 2005, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on the question of the constitutionality of Ten Commandments displays on public property. This religious text display on public property issue left many public school leaders more confused about what is proper procedure in schools. Is it appropriate for schools to display the Ten Commandments, excerpts from the Qur'an, or selections from the Sermon on the Mount?

The answer lies less in the display itself than in the purpose and duration of the display. It must be remembered that the role of public schools is academic and instructional and that by law they serve children of all faiths or none. As a result the key issues become, does the display endorse religion and is it for truly academic purposes? Applying this distinction requires tremendous wisdom on the part of educators and community leaders.

Justice O'Connor used some thought provoking words in casting her opinions in the June Ten Commandments ruling, saying, "It is true that many Americans find the Commandments in accord with their personal beliefs. But we do not count heads before enforcing the First Amendment." Other cases provide better guidance to schools seeking to adhere to O'Connor's idea of fairness. In *Stone v. Graham (1980)*, the Court held unconstitutional a Kentucky statute requiring the posting of the Ten Commandments in every public school classroom. That would be a clear endorsement of religion according to the Court.

But are there exceptions to public school display of the Commandments? Let us say that sixth grade teachers are working on History-Social Science

Content Standard 6.3

**Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the Ancient Hebrews.**

6.3.1 Describe the origins and significance of Judaism as the first monotheistic religion based on the concept of one God who sets down moral laws for humanity.  
6.3.2 Identify the sources of the ethical teachings and central beliefs of Judaism (the Hebrew Bible, the Commentaries): belief in God, observance of law, practice of the concepts of righteousness and justice, and importance of study; and describe how the ideas of the Hebrew traditions are reflected in the moral and ethical traditions of Western civilization.



## **CALIFORNIA CAMPAIGN FOR THE CIVIC MISSION OF SCHOOLS RESOLUTION**

**WHEREAS** democracy is created anew by each generation;

**WHEREAS** preparing each generation to understand our local, state, and national systems of government, support democratic principles, and develop the civic skills and dispositions needed by effective citizens, was a primary reason for the creation of public schools;

**WHEREAS** our citizens have overwhelmingly agreed over the course of 33 years of Gallup polling that “educating young people for responsible citizenship” should be the primary purpose of our schools because it is essential to the well-being of American constitutional government;

**WHEREAS** our public schools are a significant institution and a meeting place for young people of all ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds and a natural place to provide instruction and experience in the responsibility to guard the First Amendment rights of others;

**WHEREAS** the democratic principles that underlie our society, such as republicanism, limited government, separation of powers, checks and balances, the rights and responsibilities of citizens including religious liberty, support for diversity, and the need to balance freedom with order, are difficult to understand unless given practical meaning as young people mature;

**WHEREAS** the importance of students’ grasp of the concepts of civic responsibility and respect for others cannot be underestimated;

**WHEREAS** the history-social science framework goals now guiding California schools call for the integration of knowledge and cultural understanding, democratic understanding and civic values and skills attainment, and social participation;

**WHEREAS** state law only requires a single semester-long course in government in the twelfth grade, which we believe is both too little and too late;

**NOW BE IT RESOLVED**, that the California Three Rs Project urges the State Board of Education and all local school governing boards to examine current practice and develop plans to increase, broaden, and make explicit in every grade the study and application of the principles and practices of democracy as an integrated part of history-social science instruction and of school life.

*Approved by the California Three Rs Project Advisory Board April 14, 2005*

Like other supporters of the campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, the California Three Rs Project believes that by educating students for democracy, we sharpen the civic knowledge, skills, and values that keep our country vital. The First Amendment liberties that provide the foundation for all our other liberties must be understood and applied in schools and classrooms. If our schools are the heart of our democracy, then civic learning must be the heart of our schools. For more on the Civic Mission of Schools see <http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/campaign/index.html>

### **California Three Rs Project Website:**

[http://score.rims.k12.ca.us/score\\_lessons/3rs/](http://score.rims.k12.ca.us/score_lessons/3rs/)

### **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](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, San Bernardino County Superintendent of Schools, 601 N. E St., San Bernardino, CA 92410, (909) 386-2611, [peg\\_hill@sbcss.k12.ca.us](mailto:peg_hill@sbcss.k12.ca.us)

#### **For First Amendment religious liberty information, contact...**

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](mailto: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](mailto:bgrelle@csuchico.edu)