

MEDIA RELEASE

TO ALL ASSIGNMENT/NEWS/EDUCATION EDITORS

For immediate release

Director statement re Religious accommodation for Muslim prayer service at a TDSB school

Toronto, ON, Friday, July 8, 2011 — There has been a great deal written in the past week about the religious accommodation for Muslim prayers that takes place at Valley Park Middle School from November to May.

There are very many viewpoints that have been expressed concerning this subject. I wish to make the Toronto District School Board's (TDSB) position on this issue clear.

While the TDSB is part of a secular public school system, like other school boards, we exist within a broader context of law and public policy that protects and defends human rights. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms protects freedom of religion. The Ontario Human Rights Code protects an individual's freedom from discriminatory or harassing behaviour based on religion. The Toronto District School Board recognizes and is committed to the values of freedom of religion and freedom from discriminatory or harassing behaviour based on religion through our Equity Foundation Statement, Guidelines and Procedures for the Accommodation of Religious Requirements, Practices and Observances, the Human Rights Policy and Procedures, and the Safe Schools Policy.

The Toronto District School Board takes reasonable steps to provide accommodation to members of religious groups who state that the Board's operations or requirements interfere with their ability to exercise their religious beliefs and practices. The Board balances its decision to accommodate on several factors such as undue hardship, including: the cost of accommodation to the Board; health and safety risks to the person requesting accommodation and to others; and the Board's ability to fulfill its duties under Board policies and the Education Act.

Where religious accommodation is concerned, the law is quite clear: freedom of religion in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms supersedes the Education Act. As a public school board, we have a responsibility and an obligation to accommodate faith needs.

Here are some facts regarding the law:

1. Indoctrinating religious instruction is prohibited in public boards.

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2. Non-indoctrinating instruction about religion is allowed.
3. Scriptural readings from a variety of religions and beliefs, and moments of silence, are permitted during opening or closing exercises.

One of our primary goals is always to maximize instructional time for our students. We do this entirely within the context of instruction rather than indoctrination in any religion. In this way, we strive to achieve the respectful separation of religious devotion and education within our public schools. That is our legal and moral duty.

In the case of Valley Park, the school is not teaching the “religious practice.” Rather it is accommodating for the religious and spiritual needs of the students like many other schools do around the country for a number of different faith communities. Providing this religious accommodation does not violate any Board policies since the service is not a Board or school activity.

There have been concerns expressed that the practice of Islam separates individuals by gender. We do not have the authority to tell faith groups how to pray. The division of the sexes which occurs during the service is a part of the Islamic faith. Students who participate in the prayer services do so voluntarily and with parental permission, and no one is obligated to participate.

We understand that this is a very sensitive issue for many, and that there will continue to be differing opinions among members of our communities. However, we believe it is the willingness to have courageous conversations like these that has made Canada the diverse yet cohesive society that comes together in Toronto District School Board’s classrooms every day.

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