

The OSCE Guidelines on Teaching about Religion and Beliefs in Public Schools

In November 2007 the OSCE published its “Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religion and Beliefs in Public Schools” (ISBN 83-60190-48-8). These were prepared by its panel of experts on freedom of religion or belief. The entire publication is [available on-line](#).

The following extract states their conclusions, recommendations and (especially) key guiding principles, and is reproduced here as being very much in line with humanist and secular principles.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Teaching about religions and beliefs may be adapted to take into account the needs of different national and local school systems and traditions. The Toledo Guiding Principles are based on the following overall conclusions that are supported by a growing consensus among lawyers and educators and which should be taken into consideration by all OSCE participating States when devising schemes for teaching about religions and beliefs:

Conclusions

1. Knowledge about religions and beliefs can reinforce appreciation of the importance of respect for everyone’s right to freedom of religion or belief, foster democratic citizenship, promote understanding of societal diversity and, at the same time, enhance social cohesion.
2. Knowledge about religions and beliefs has the valuable potential of reducing conflicts that are based on lack of understanding for others’ beliefs and of encouraging respect for their rights.
3. Knowledge about religions and beliefs is an essential part of a quality education. It is required to understand much of history, literature, and art, and can be helpful in broadening one’s cultural horizons and in deepening one’s insight into the complexities of past and present.
4. Teaching about religions and beliefs is most effective when combined with efforts to instil respect for the rights of others, even when there is disagreement about religions or beliefs. The right to freedom of religion or belief is a universal right and carries with it an obligation to protect the rights of others, including respect for the dignity of all human beings.
5. An individual’s personal religious (or non-religious) beliefs do not provide sufficient reason to exclude that person from teaching about religions and beliefs. The most important considerations in this regard relate to professional expertise, as well as to basic attitudes towards or commitment to human rights in general and freedom of religion or belief in particular.
6. Reasonable adaptations of policies in response to distinctive religious needs may be required to avoid violation of rights to freedom of religion or belief. Even when not strictly required as a matter of law, such adaptations and flexibility contribute to the building of a climate of tolerance and mutual respect.
7. Where compulsory courses involving teaching about religions and beliefs are sufficiently neutral and objective, requiring participation in such courses as such does not violate the freedom of religion and belief (although states are free to allow partial or total opt-outs in these settings).

Recommendations

It is recommended that the OSCE participating States:

1. Disseminate the Toledo Guiding Principles among teachers, school administrative staff, students associations, parents organizations, education policy makers, and all parties that could be interested in teaching about religions and beliefs, and draw upon these Principles when such teaching is developed or implemented.
2. Apply, when developing and implementing these programmes, the relevant standards and recommendations of international organizations, including OSCE commitments as well as the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly's recommendations 1202 [1993] on religious tolerance in a democratic society, 1396 [1999] on religion and democracy, and 1720 [2005] on education and religion.
3. Evaluate existing curricula being used in public schools that touch upon teaching about religions and beliefs with a view to determining whether they promote respect for freedom-of-religion rights and whether they are impartial, balanced, inclusive, age appropriate, free of bias and meet professional standards.
4. Assess the process that leads to the development of curricula on teaching about religions and beliefs to make sure that this process is sensitive to the needs of various religious and belief communities and that all relevant stakeholders have an opportunity to have their voices heard.
5. Examine to what extent existing teacher-training institutions are capable of providing the necessary professional training for teaching about religions and beliefs in a way that promotes respect for human rights and, in particular, for freedom of religion or belief.
6. Determine the extent to which teacher-training institutions provide sufficient knowledge of human rights issues, an understanding of the diversity of religious and non-religious views in society, a firm grasp of various teaching methodologies (with particular attention to those founded on an intercultural approach) and significant insight into ways that one can teach about religions and beliefs in a respectful, impartial and professional way.
7. Facilitate the organization of processes that provide input to authors, editors and publishers who publish textbooks on teaching about religions and beliefs so that they can be optimally respectful of the Toledo Guiding Principles.
8. Take advantage of the expertise of the OSCE/ODIHR Advisory Council on Freedom of Religion and Belief when they develop or implement curricula to teach about religions and beliefs or when they establish or assess teacher-training institutions and programmes.

Based on the final conclusions and recommendations, the following key guiding principles have been identified and are proposed to the attention of the OSCE participating States for promoting the teaching of religions and beliefs in their schools.

Key Guiding Principles

Whenever teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools is provided in OSCE participating States, the following guiding principles should be considered:

1. Teaching about religions and beliefs must be provided in ways that are fair, accurate and based on sound scholarship. Students should learn about religions and beliefs in an environment respectful of human rights, fundamental freedoms and civic values.
2. Those who teach about religions and beliefs should have a commitment to religious freedom that contributes to a school environment and practices that foster protection of the rights of others in a spirit of mutual respect and understanding among members of the school community.

3. Teaching about religions and beliefs is a major responsibility of schools, but the manner in which this teaching takes place should not undermine or ignore the role of families and religious or belief organizations in transmitting values to successive generations.

4. Efforts should be made to establish advisory bodies at different levels that take an inclusive approach to involving different stakeholders in the preparation and implementation of curricula and in the training of teachers.

5. Where a compulsory programme involving teaching about religions and beliefs is not sufficiently objective, efforts should be made to revise it to make it more balanced and impartial, but where this is not possible, or cannot be accomplished immediately, recognizing opt-out rights may be a satisfactory solution for parents and pupils, provided that the opt-out arrangements are structured in a sensitive and non-discriminatory way.

6. Those who teach about religions and beliefs should be adequately educated to do so. Such teachers need to have the knowledge, attitude and skills to teach about religions and beliefs in a fair and balanced way. Teachers need not only subject-matter competence but pedagogical skills so that they can interact with students and help students interact with each other in sensitive and respectful ways.

7. Preparation of curricula, textbooks and educational materials for teaching about religions and beliefs should take into account religious and non-religious views in a way that is inclusive, fair, and respectful. Care should be taken to avoid inaccurate or prejudicial material, particularly when this reinforces negative stereotypes.

8. Curricula should be developed in accordance with recognized professional standards in order to ensure a balanced approach to study about religions and beliefs. Development and implementation of curricula should also include open and fair procedures that give all interested parties appropriate opportunities to offer comments and advice.

9. Quality curricula in the area of teaching about religions and beliefs can only contribute effectively to the educational aims of the Toledo Guiding Principles if teachers are professionally trained to use the curricula and receive ongoing training to further develop their knowledge and competences regarding this subject matter. Any basic teacher preparation should be framed and developed according to democratic and human rights principles and include insight into cultural and religious diversity in society.

10. Curricula focusing on teaching about religions and beliefs should give attention to key historical and contemporary developments pertaining to religion and belief, and reflect global and local issues. They should be sensitive to different local manifestations of religious and secular plurality found in schools and the communities they serve. Such sensitivities will help address the concerns of students, parents and other stakeholders in education.