

## **Guidelines and Procedures for Religious Accommodations**

The Toronto District School Board is public school board that is open to all pupils, regardless of religion, culture, race or ethnicity. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms protects our fundamental freedoms, including the freedoms of conscience, religion, thought and belief. The Ontario Human Rights Code protects an individual's freedom from discrimination based on religion.

The Toronto District School Board recognizes and is committed to the values of these protections through the Human Rights Policy and Procedures, Equity Foundation Statement, Guidelines and Procedures for the Accommodation of Religious Requirements, Practices and Observances, and the Caring and Safe Schools Policy.

The Board continues to follow the legal requirement that religious exercises and indoctrination shall not occur in its schools. However, there are requests for religious accommodation that can be accommodated. For example, students are not required to attend school on a religious holy day. They are also accommodated with respect to religious dress requirements. In all cases, requests are considered in light of legal and safety requirements.

In the case of Valley Park Middle School, at the request of parents and the local community (which is predominately Muslim), the school is providing unused space for prayer. The prayer services are not a Board or school activity and are not considered to be part of the instructional day. The prayer service lasts approximately 30 minutes and then students return to class. In the past, several hundred Muslim students at Valley Park were leaving the school each Friday afternoon between November and March to attend prayers at a local mosque, which meant missing more instructional time and walking unsupervised to and from the mosque.

The school is not teaching any "religious practice." Rather, it is providing a practical solution to allow students to adhere to religious practices that are required to be observed during Friday afternoons.

There have been concerns expressed that the practice of Islam separates individuals by gender. This division of males and females during prayer is part of the Islamic faith. The prayer is not conducted under Board auspices, and we are not in a position to dictate how religious exercises, such as prayer, are conducted by any religion. Students who participate in the prayer services do so voluntarily and with parental permission.

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.

## Comments from the Community:

### **Canadian Muslim Lawyers Association**

July 15, 2011

*The Canadian Muslim Lawyers Association (CMLA) applauds the decision of the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) to permit private prayer for one half-hour each week in a designated space at Valley Park Middle School. This sign of tolerance and respect allows students of the Muslim faith to avoid having to leave school premises to attend the once weekly congregational prayer, which is an essential part of the Islamic faith, and ensures that they can return to class safely and in a timely fashion.*

### **The Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-CAN)**

July 6, 2011

*We wholeheartedly praise the TDSB for taking a principled stand to protect the religious accommodation of Muslim youngsters at Valley Park Middle School. The accommodation made is in line with Federal and Provincial human rights laws which make it clear that service providers, including public schools, must accommodate religious needs to the point of undue hardship.*

*This accommodation fulfills the objective of ensuring the educational requirements of students are not impeded by their desire to fulfill any religious observance and is essential to the emotional, spiritual, and academic well-being of Muslim students. Furthermore, this measure in no way imposes this accommodation on other groups or restricts their rights to make any request for religious accommodation that they deem appropriate.*

### **Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs**

*Religious accommodation in the school system, while not an absolute and unqualified right, benefits all faiths. The principle of reasonable religious accommodation is enshrined in Canada's national and provincial human rights legislation.*

### **Toronto Area Interfaith Council**

October 25, 2011

*The Toronto Area Interfaith Council supports the Toronto District School Board and the Valley Park Middle School in the religious accommodation of Muslim students by providing space for Friday prayers. We note that such accommodation accords with national and provincial human rights legislation; it seeks to ensure that educational requirements are not compromised by the fulfillment of religious obligations; and it does not impose any constraints, religious or otherwise, on any of the students.*