



*Religious Worlds of New York*



*Curriculum Development Project*

## **Religious Diversity in Springfield: A Professional / Staff Development Plan**

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### *Abstract*

This project is designed to initiate an open discussion for teachers in a K-8 non-sectarian, independent day school about how why to teach comparative religion as an academic subject in a secular school setting, and about how to do so appropriately.

The project was developed by the Head of School at the Ridgewood School, in Springfield, Ohio. The goal is to provide teachers with a variety of classroom and community “lived religion” experiences, in order to grow their own background knowledge and understanding of religious communities in the Springfield area. The ultimate goal of this professional development is to begin incorporating academic discussions of religion into social studies and language arts curricula. This professional development plan is part of a broader plan in the field of diversity that directly supports the school’s mission, vision, and values, in addition to fitting within the goals for the current three-year strategic plan.

### *Curricular and Community Context*

One of the core values adopted by Ridgewood School, a non-sectarian K-8 independent school in central Ohio, is to “celebrate diversity.” The language is precise. Ridgewood School has chosen not just to teach tolerance, or to respect differences, but instead has chosen to teach our students to celebrate each other, and to learn and grow from our differences. And these differences abound at Ridgewood as well. In a state with only 1% of its population identifying as Muslim or Jewish, and less than 1% identifying as Hindu, over 15% of Ridgewood students are Muslim, with 4.2% who are Hindu and 5.2% who are Jewish. Ridgewood’s religious diversity is unique to our geographic region, and is continually identified by Ridgewood families and staff as one of its greatest strengths.

But while religious diversity is respected at Ridgewood, it is not yet celebrated widely across the school. Family and community events are carefully planned around holidays; religious and cultural traditions and expectations are widely discussed amongst faculty and parents. But our students

know relatively little about their classmates' faiths. Despite the relative breadth of our families, world religions have not yet found their way into the curriculum at Ridgewood school. One of my greatest goals, as Head of School at Ridgewood, is to incorporate frank and academic conversations about the faiths represented in our student body, facilitated by both our staff and our students. I feel passionately that the only way for Ridgewood School to truly value the celebration of diversity is for us as a community to learn more about each other in our curriculum.

Before we, as educators, can begin to facilitate dialogue with our students about religion, it is important that we have a better understanding of the faiths that are practiced amongst our families. The following professional development plan is designed to provide basic, practical information about world religions to our staff, in order to help to better facilitate understanding of our students and between our students.

### *Topics and Schedule*

The "Religious Diversity in Springfield" plan utilizes the professional development time built into teachers' schedules on a monthly basis, as well as some time at the beginning of the school year, as part of a year-long diversity initiative. The tentative schedule is:

#### **Day 1: 4-Hour Introduction to Discussing Religion in Schools**

Guiding Question: *Why (and how) should we talk about comparative religion in a secular, academic context?*

- Introductory video: [\*What do You Believe? The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers\*](#) (50 minute documentary film profiling a diverse group of teenagers as they share their most personal beliefs about God, the purpose of life, morality, suffering, prayer, death and religious freedom in the United States)
- Small Group Debrief/Guiding Questions: How are we defined by religion? Why should the study of religion be a part of secular education?
- Introduction to Religious Liberty and Education: The First Amendment, [\*Abington v. Schempp\*](#), and how independent schools fit into this whole mix!
- Break
- Introduction to the Study of Religion: What does a balanced, objective approach really look like?
- Small Group Discussion: Questions vs. Conflicts (teachers will brainstorm questions that might lead to inclusion or exclusion for particular religious groups)
- Regrouping
- Large Group Activity: Dialogue vs. Debate, aka How to Talk about Religious Differences Without Arguing about Them. (Teachers will be broken into teams based on preferred type of dessert, then model/practice ways to share about their favorite dessert without arguing with each other.)

**Possible Future Lived Religion Experiences (to be scheduled during regular monthly professional development release time):**

- Site Visit to the Islamic Association of the Miami Valley. This is the mosque of many of Ridgewood's Muslim families.
- Site Visit to the Yellow Springs Dharma Center. Interestingly, this center represents three Buddhist traditions, Zen, Vipassana and Vajrayana, allowing for a comparative experience in Buddhist diversity in one space.
- Panel Discussion: The Diversity *Within* Christianity. Speakers may include representatives of Protestant, Catholic, Jehovah's Witness, Greek Orthodox, and non-denominational Christian communities
- Guest Lecturer: The Hindu Community of Springfield
- Site Visit to Temple Shalom

In addition to these workshops, we will work to make a variety of local religious experiences, including worship services and celebrations, available to teachers on their own time and as they are so inclined to participate. The hope is that the more teachers know about the variety of faiths represented at Ridgewood, the more easily they will be able to facilitate discussion amongst their students.

***For information about the Religious Worlds of New York summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching on religious diversity, see:***

**[www.religiousworldsnyc.org](http://www.religiousworldsnyc.org)**