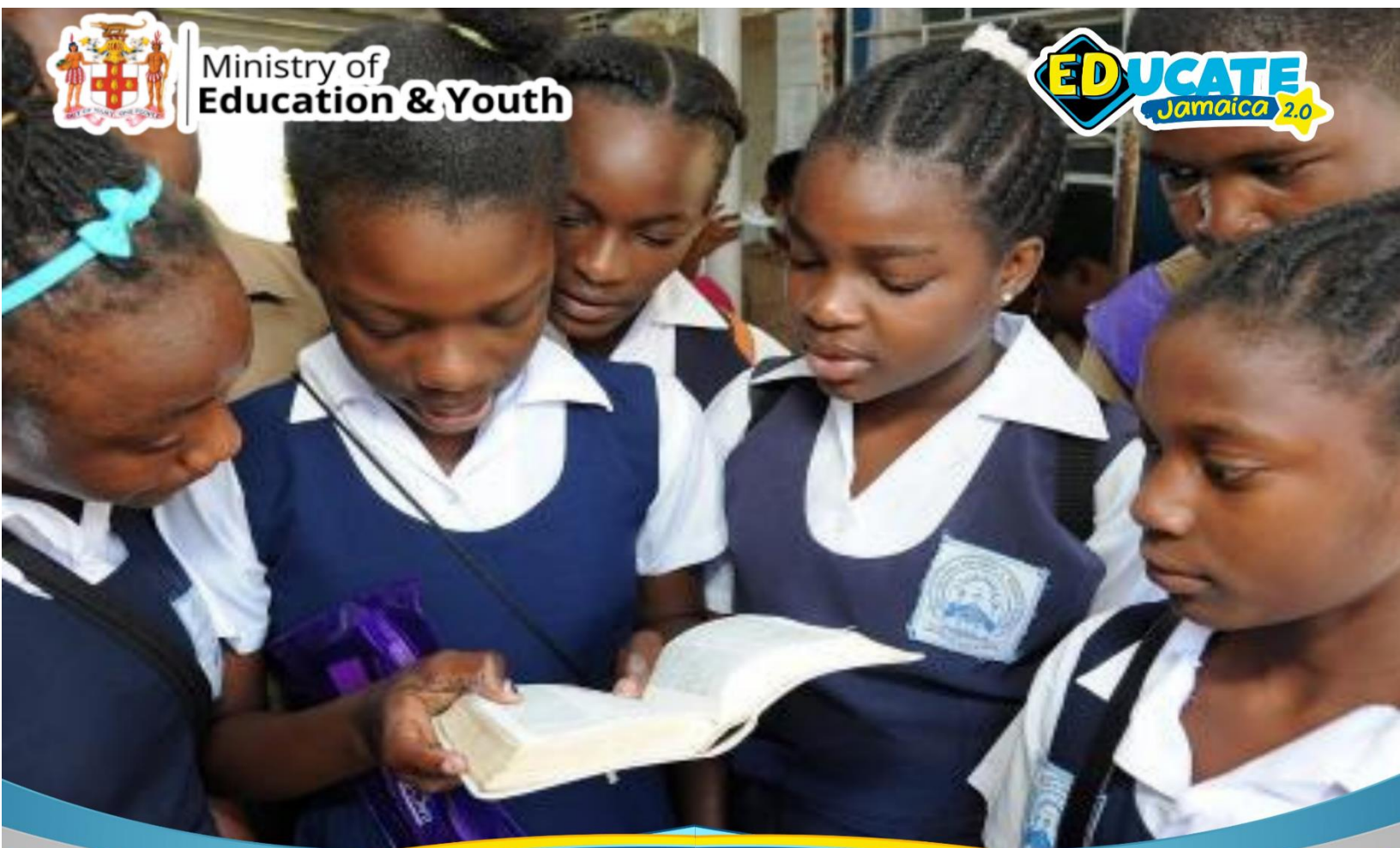




Ministry of
Education & Youth



2023

THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION & YOUTH

GUIDELINES

FOR DEVOTIONS IN SCHOOLS

The Ministry of Education and Youth presents comprehensive guidelines for the conduct of devotions within the school environment.

Ministry of Education and Youth Guidelines for Devotions in Schools
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FOREWARD

A fundamental responsibility of the education system is to create an environment for all students to realize their full potential, by ensuring an atmosphere that is inclusive and enabling to foster the development of the whole person.

Devotion in schools is an educational activity that encourages respect for the beliefs of students and effectively contributes to each student's character development through planned curricula and extra-curricular activities that promote moral and spiritual values.

Recent and historical incidents have led to the need to bring order to devotion and worship sessions in our educational institutions. The positive message echoed by the nation is that devotion is a necessary activity that must be retained in all public schools.

The guidelines on devotions for public schools give attention to the purpose, aims, principles and order that should guide devotions in public schools.

Foremost, these guidelines prioritize the safety and emotional well-being of every student. It is imperative that the practice of devotion does not inadvertently cause any distress or discomfort to any individual, regardless of their background or beliefs.

Accountability is the cornerstone of these guidelines. By establishing mechanisms that ensure adherence to the principles set forth, we aim to ensure that devotion remains a positive force for character development rather than veering into territory that might compromise the well-being of students.

A core principle woven into these guidelines is that of non-denominational practice. Devotions should serve to unite, rather than divide, by focusing on values and principles that are universally applicable, transcending specific religious affiliations.

It is imperative to clarify that these guidelines are not an attempt at micro-management. Instead, they provide a framework to strike a harmonious balance between promoting the virtues of devotion while respecting the autonomy and individuality of educational institutions.

In essence, these guidelines aim to create an environment where devotions contribute effectively to the holistic development of each student. By adhering to the principles of safety, accountability, and non-denominational inclusivity, we strive to ensure that devotions are a unifying force that nurtures the character and ethical foundation of our future generations.

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The Rationale for Guidelines on Devotion

Context and Commitment

The Ministry of Education and Youth (MoEY) recognizes that our schools provide education and training to students from many different cultural, social, economic and emotional backgrounds, faiths and denominations. In carrying out their functions, schools are guided by laws, policies, standards as well as core values and principles. Through the formal and informal curricula, schools are able to provide experiences and learning opportunities for students' holistic development by creating a context that is safe, caring, inspiring and inclusive, yet challenging the intellect.

Religion as a discipline advocates an academic approach to the study of religions objectively, as a means of gaining greater understanding of human experience and of the world in which we live. It emphasizes that there is a relationship between the Creator and Creation and, provides guidance through the positive universal attitudes and values taught by religions. The knowledge, skills and attitudes that are developed, derive from an understanding of religions and their place in everyday life. The outcomes are the application of religious insights to personal, moral and social development. Students are taught about the responsibilities which are entrusted upon them personally and socially. These include; caring for the environment, matters of social justice, being good and virtuous citizens of the highest moral integrity and character, developing natural talents, caring, sharing, living, loving and giving.

Since the establishment of a formal system of education, schools, especially faith-based ones, have been given autonomy to determine how devotions will be used to influence the spiritual atmosphere of their institution; some with admirable outcomes and others, questionable. Reasons such as the debate about devotions in school, the decline in values and attitudes in society, and the expected role of faith-based and other organizations in the implementation of the curriculum and initiatives for character development, serve as indicators of the need to further support schools in their efforts to cater to the spiritual domain. Providing guiding principles that complement developmentally appropriate practice is one of the many ways of addressing these concerns as well as to reap the benefits of nurturing spirit, soul and body.

The Guidelines for Devotions in schools provide a broad framework for managing devotional activities in the best interest of the students, staff and other stakeholders within the boundaries of the Jamaican Constitution.

The Guidelines for Devotions in schools are also consistent with the vision, values and aims of the National Standards Curricula (NSC), which place emphasis on co-curricular linkages that devotion also serves due to its relevance and connection to the Enrichment Subjects such as Religious Education, Civics, Health and Family Life Education etc.

The MoEY recognizes that the education system in Jamaica was started by various church organizations and interests and approximately 30 per cent of our schools today remain church-owned. It also recognizes the critical role of the Church in building the spiritual fabric of our people and will continue to support the relationship between school and church.

The Ministry also accepts that in a country where just over 50 per cent of the population consistently identify as Christian, spiritual values need to be encouraged, not diminished, and that devotional exercises should be inclusive and sensitive in time and structure whether in schools owned by the Church or the Government of Jamaica.

Further, the *Education Act, 1965* (hereinafter “the Act”) gives the Minister with responsibility for education the general power to contribute towards the spiritual development of the education system.¹ The Act also provides that it shall not require as a condition of admission or attendance of any student of a public educational institution that the student shall, inter alia, if his or her parent objects, attend any religious observance or any instruction in religious subjects or attend such institution on any day specifically set apart for religious worship by the religious body to which he belongs.²

Guidelines on Devotions for public schools are global, guided by the legislative framework as stated in the Constitutions, Education Acts and Regulations of particular countries. Broadly stated, the devotion or worship guidelines set out the requirements for collective acts of worship that are appropriate to the age, aptitude, family and cultural backgrounds of students³; that are non-denominational in nature; an essential

¹ Section 3, Education Act, 1965

² Section 18, Education Act, 1965

³ Collective Worship Guidance and Sample Policy 2017

educational activity that contributes to the personal, spiritual and moral growth of the whole person^{4 5}

The Ministry is committed to having devotions remain as a supporting curricula activity. Devotion exercises in school are pivotal to the proper socialization of our children and therefore, guidelines must be established to protect and enhance its critical function in the development of our children.

It is, therefore, important to ensure that guidelines which recognize the diverse religious heritage of Jamaicans are agreed upon. The guidelines should:

- extend the concept of equity to the relationship between religion and education in a way that recognizes the rich religious diversity of our land
- acknowledge that our nation is in a crisis of civility; this signifies a moral crisis resulting from a deficiency of a moral compass. It, therefore, signifies the need to provide, to a greater extent, an anchor for children in universal virtues
- recognize that Jamaica is a democratic society with a diverse population of different cultures and religions. Express religious meanings under conditions conducive to cooperation and care for others should be encouraged
- emphasize that public schools have an educational responsibility for teaching and learning about religion. This responsibility includes protecting young people from religious discrimination and coercion
- ensure that we embrace a collective identity where shared members of our cultural minority do not experience a sense of separateness from the majority

⁴ Collective Worship Guidelines; Chester West and Chester SACRE.

⁵ Collective Worship Sacre Guidelines for Schools in Newham 2015; Newham Council Communications 03496

The Aims of Devotion in School

The aim of devotion is to empower students to participate in activities that contribute to their spiritual well-being by utilizing designated times and occasions as avenues for learning and nurturing those habits that can transform schools from organizations into communities of shared values, fostered by self-management. Devotion should provide students and staff with the kind of opportunities that will enable them to:

- Examine their beliefs and spirituality based on sacred/religious principles.
- Acknowledge/demonstrate awareness of the godly influence, principles, and virtues that contribute to their spiritual well-being
- Find answers to questions about “things sacred” that relate to God, their existence, purpose, challenges, relationships, etc.
- Unite as a school community in “fostering truth” by actively promoting spiritual values/virtues and the ethical standards they are being exposed to through education (formally and informally curriculum)
- Affirm the positive attitudes and values portrayed through their lives and others.
- Respect the sensitivity of others towards their core beliefs and spiritual values they have adopted
- Worship through diverse cultural forms of creative expression, e.g., music, dance, the spoken word, art, and poetry, in ways that are appropriate for different contexts (formal and informal).
- Engage in communal and individual reflection, inquiry, exploration, and contemplation on matters that pertain to developing godly character.
- Connect with others through the sharing of gifts/talents and expressing appreciation for these attributes in sacred and other settings.
- Appreciate the spiritual domain in relation to other aspects of self and the measures being undertaken to nurture them spiritually.
- Integrate and apply the spiritual principles/values explored in devotions and through Religious Education and other enrichment programmes to contribute to a positive school ethos
- Develop universal values through devotions.
- Devotion activities are specifically design to not engender fear.

Principles for Devotions in School

Devotions should underpin the principles of unity, diversity, inclusivity, tolerance, self-discovery and development. The guiding principles advocate that:

- living harmoniously is a corporate responsibility. As such, opportunities, which cultivate capacities for mutual recognition and tolerance, in accordance with constitutional values, should be embraced and upheld.
- unity within diversity, is most effective in practical terms when, all students are afforded the opportunity to join together in a process of self-development and self-discovery and, where there is a shared vision of goodness and truth and a sense of community.
- a practical approach to demonstrate 'inclusivity', in a religious context, is to objectively present religious ethos that encourages unity of purpose and spirit, that does not aim to segregate, dominate or suppress others.
- Success in life goes beyond material wealth and entails identifying and choosing to adopt values/virtues for fulfilling divine/God-given purpose and healthy desires.
- Sacred/spiritual principles are important in the search for wisdom and understanding of life's experiences and spiritual matters in a guided and safe environment
- Devotions can contribute to spiritual discipline for daily life in various contexts.
- Consistency in the use of devotions that promote respect for National Emblems through ways that demonstrate their importance and the application of their messages can have empowering/transformational effects.
- Devotions complement the teaching and learning of values/virtues addressed through the formal curriculum and informal curricula (form time, clubs and societies, social and civic events).

The Legal Requirements for Devotion

The Ministry expects school authorities to manage devotions in accordance with the provisions of the Jamaican Constitution, the Education Act, The Child Care and Protection Act, 2004, and any other relevant Acts of Parliament, and international conventions to which Jamaica is a signatory.

Whilst the Ministry encourages devotions in schools, our school leaders have a responsibility to exercise caution as to content and likely impact on students. A teacher has a duty of care towards a child entrusted in his or her care as a teacher acts in loco parentis (in the place/instead of a parent). The importance of freedom of association is well documented in the Jamaican Constitution.

Chapter III of the Jamaican Constitution, which treats with the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, provides that every person, regardless of race, place of origin, political opinions, colour, creed or sex, is entitled to certain fundamental rights and freedoms. These include - the right to life, liberty and security of the person; the right to freedom of movement; the right to equitable and humane treatment; enjoyment of property; freedom of conscience; freedom of association; respect for private and family life; the right to freedom from discrimination; and the right to freedom of religion.

The enjoyment of these rights and freedom is "subject to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and for the public interest."

The Ministry of Education and Youth recognizes that Statutes as well as common law recognize the welfare of the child as the first and paramount consideration.

The laws in Jamaica recognize that the welfare of the child is not only measured by physical comfort or money. Welfare has to be taken in its widest sense and includes the moral and religious well-being of the child.

Safety of Staff and Students during Devotion in Schools

Students and staff must remain safe during devotion. Principals are expected to, along with their designated safety and security team to ensure the safety of students and staff as they assemble for devotion and return to their classrooms.

Care should be taken for the following:

- Ensure all grades/ classes are assigned a designated area on the school compound that they assemble for devotion
- Safety coordinators/ staff responsible are assigned to entrance and exit points to ensure an account of every student during devotion
- The school staff and students must be aware of their assembly points during emergencies. These must be appropriately and clearly marked
- All staff and students must know the different emergency signals (earthquake, fire, tsunami, invasion, etc.) and the designated response for each and evacuation routes
- Schools must (simulate/ practice) safety drills for devotions to become familiar with the plans of the school
- All members of staff must become familiar with the Safety and Security Policy Guidelines for schools
- Principals should ensure that where emergencies occur during devotion there is an agreed and communicated plan for students':
 - return to their classrooms;
 - parents/ guardians/ wards pickup of students from the compound
- All schools must institute an agreed reporting structure to the emergency entities and the Ministry during or as soon as possible after an incident.
- An emergency directory must be created for all staff and students and a reporting structure be in place to report to parents and next of kin in the event of an emergency

Guidelines on Devotions in School

1. Devotion is required to be delivered in all schools in accordance with the Education Act 1965
2. Devotions in schools will conform to the Jamaican Constitution, which provides that every person, regardless of race, place of origin, political opinions, colour, creed or sex, is entitled to certain fundamental rights and freedoms and is in keeping with our national anthem, pledge and motto.
3. Devotions must form part of the regular group gatherings in all schools
4. Devotions are to be scheduled and reflected in the formal timetable
5. Parents must be informed in advance of the offering of any programme or activity with devotions so that they may withdraw consent for their children to participate in that part of the programme or activity
6. Devotions should be “wholly or mainly” of a universally accepted value; examples, being helpful, love, peace, sharing, kindness, and obedience, while being non-denominational.
7. Devotions should incorporate universally accepted virtues and values taught by religions
8. Devotions must be conducted in a large communal space or classroom that is well ventilated
9. These guidelines must be included in all school handbooks
10. Parents are required to read and sign the school’s handbook as confirmation of the agreement
11. Devotions must not last for more than 15 to 30 minutes – except **ONE** day per week where it can go on for 30 to 45 minutes.
12. Devotions should emphasize respect and care for others ,service to our communities and environmental stewardship
13. Students should be encouraged to make decisions based on universally accepted values and not societal pressures of all sorts
14. Students should be guided to commit themselves to nurturing their positive purpose and developing lifelong practices towards self-improvement

The list below are activities that must be prohibited at schools devotions.

1. Students engaged in physical touching or removing of any of their clothing as a requirement to participate in devotions
2. Séances

3. Killing of animals
4. Prostrating
5. Ablution
6. converting or attempt to convert (someone) from one religion, belief, or opinion to another
7. Drinking, eating or rubbing on of any substance
8. Display and or worshiping of idols and or symbols
9. Tarot for spirit or speaking in tongues

Exemptions and the Right to Withdraw from Devotion

Parents may exercise an option to withdraw their child's participation in devotion, if they determine it to be contrary to their beliefs.

Exempt students should not be educationally disadvantaged by such a decision and the school remains responsible for suitable supervision of the child that is withdrawn.

Schools should make productive alternative arrangements that can contribute to the development of values/virtues for students who do not attend such sessions

Visiting Speakers or Guests

As the devotion is a spiritual experience, care should be taken in selecting leaders who will guide the students and staff. Visitors who will participate in devotion should be briefed on the accepted guidelines for worship. All visiting speakers or guests should be informed of the following; the:

- background/educational context of the school
- values and principles of the school;
- age and aptitude of the students;
- appropriate delivery of material (the appropriate content)
- cultural sensitivity of the students and school community,
- duration of the devotion.

The Management of Devotions in Schools

The Principal is the accountable officer responsible for devotions in schools, upon consultation with, supported by the Board of Governors, and must ensure that the devotions comply with the laws and policies of the Country, the Ministry and the school.

The Principal and the Guidance and Counselling Department or designated team at the appropriate school level are responsible for ensuring that the legal responsibilities for conducting devotions in school are followed at all times that the school meets for devotions.

Monitoring and Evaluation of Devotions in Schools

The joint responsibility of the Principal and or their designate will be to:

- Provide support for the planning and facilitating of devotion and documenting the approach taken e.g. resources for devotion, themes, vetting of visitors or guests who will conduct devotion
- Take the steps required to gain the support of the school community in observing the Guidelines on Devotions and in monitoring to achieve the purpose for including devotions in schools
- Evaluate the effectiveness with which these guidelines are implemented
- Through a consultative process, comment on the impact of devotions in the course of inspections, where significant benefits or issues are identified and the information disseminated to the school community.

The Ministry of Education and Youth through its School Improvement Officers will:

- Monitor the compliance of schools with these guidelines;
- Support the effective implementation of these guidelines by schools;

Awareness and Compliance with the Guidelines on Devotions in Schools

School leaders will:

- Create their own guidelines using the MoEY's guidelines on devotions, in consultation with their school community;
- Distribute the MoEY's guidelines on devotions to staff, students, parents and caregivers, particularly at the time of student enrolment;
- Ensure the MoEY's guidelines are effectively implemented throughout the school;
- Keep parents regularly informed in advance of the school's plans for devotion. In so doing, inform all parents at enrolment, and on request, of devotions provided at school and of their right to withdraw their children by providing a written request;

- Principals should manage applications from religious groups to offer co-curricular programmes.

Conclusion

The MoEY recognizes that schools provide transformational learning experiences to students from many different cultural, social, economic, emotional and religious backgrounds. The MoEY deems devotions as a critical part of a child's all-round development as devotions are designed for upholding civility and teaching the core universal values, which are milestones in the character building of the nation.

Appendix

1. **Jamaican Constitution** – states that every person, regardless of race, place of origin, political opinions, colour, creed or sex, is entitled to certain fundamental rights and freedoms and is in keeping with our national anthem, pledge and motto.
2. **Education Act, Section 3 (e)** - It shall be lawful for the Minister - to contribute towards the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the community by securing that efficient education shall be available to meet the needs of the Island
3. **Education Act, Section 18 (4)** Subject to the provisions of this section, the school day in every public educational institution shall include time for collective worship on the part of all students in attendance at the institution, and the arrangements made therefor shall provide for a single act of worship attended by all such students unless, in the opinion of the Board of Management, the premises of the institution are such as to make it impracticable to assemble the students for such purpose.