Ministry of Education, Skills, Youth & Information

TRANSFORMING EDUCATION FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

DEVOTIONAL GUIDELINES

FOR PUBLIC EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Ministry of Education, Skills, Youth and Information

October 2026









RESPECT FOR ALL | POSITIVE VALUES | CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT | INCLUSIVE AND SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS | SAFE SCHOOLS | SERVICE TO OTHERS

LEARNING | PEOPLE | OPPORTUNITY | A BRIGHTER JAMAICA

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Foreword

A fundamental responsibility of the education system is to create an environment in which all students are able to realise their full potential. This includes ensuring that schools provide a safe, orderly, and supportive atmosphere that fosters the development of the whole person intellectually, socially, emotionally, morally, and spiritually.

Devotional exercises have long been a recognised feature of Jamaican schools and reflect the historical role of the Christian Church in the development of education in Jamaica. These exercises continue to provide opportunities for prayer, worship, reflection, and encouragement, and contribute to the development of character, discipline, moral awareness, and responsible citizenship.

In the Jamaican context, devotional exercises in public educational institutions have traditionally been Christian in nature, reflecting the faith heritage of the majority of Jamaicans, including many parents whose children attend public schools. At the same time, the law provides respectful opt-out arrangements for students whose parents object to participation in religious observances. These protections must continue to be upheld.

Recent public discussions, including concerns arising from an incident at one of the country's secondary schools, have highlighted the need for greater clarity regarding the organisation and administration of devotional activities in public educational institutions. The prevailing national view is that devotion remains a necessary and valued activity that should be retained in schools, while being conducted in a manner that is lawful, orderly, and appropriate to the school environment.

Accordingly, the Ministry of Education, Skills, Youth and Information has developed these Guidelines to provide schools with direction on the purpose, principles, organisation, and administration of devotional exercises. These Guidelines are intended to support school leaders in maintaining devotional practices in a manner that respects Jamaica's Christian heritage, preserves the ethos of the school community, upholds the rights of students and parents under Jamaican law, and contributes positively to the overall school environment.

Through continued collaboration with churches, educators, parents, and other stakeholders, the Ministry remains committed to ensuring that devotional activities continue to play a meaningful role in supporting the moral and spiritual development of Jamaican students.

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Executive Summary

Devotional exercises have historically formed an integral part of the Jamaican education system. The development of education in Jamaica was strongly influenced by churches and faith-based organisations that established many of the earliest schools across the island. As a consequence, devotional activities such as prayer, scripture reading, singing, and spiritual reflection have long been incorporated into school life.

These practices have traditionally supported the moral and spiritual development of students and contributed to the formation of values such as integrity, responsibility, compassion, discipline, and service to others. Many public educational institutions continue to operate under church ownership or sponsorship arrangements, reflecting the enduring partnership between the State and religious organisations in the provision of education.

Recent public discussions and concerns raised by educators, parents, and religious stakeholders have highlighted the need for greater clarity regarding the legal framework, administrative responsibilities, and practical arrangements surrounding devotional exercises in schools. These Guidelines have therefore been prepared to provide schools with administrative guidance on the conduct of devotional activities within the framework of Jamaican law.

The Guidelines affirm the importance of devotional practices within Jamaican schools while recognising the constitutional rights of students, parents, teachers, and religious bodies. They are intended to support schools in managing devotional exercises responsibly while maintaining the traditions and ethos of the school community.

The Guidelines do not seek to regulate religious doctrine, prescribe theology, or interfere with the teachings of churches or denominations associated with schools. Neither are they intended to advance any notion that all religions are interchangeable or equivalent. Rather, they provide administrative guidance to assist school leaders in organising devotional activities in ways that respect the law, protect the welfare of students, preserve the school's religious ethos, and maintain the orderly functioning of schools.

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Introduction: Background and Context

Devotional exercises have long been a feature of Jamaican schools. Historically, churches played a central role in the establishment and development of educational institutions throughout the island. These institutions often incorporated devotional practices into the daily routine of school life as a means of encouraging worship, moral reflection, and spiritual development among students.

Today, many public educational institutions continue to operate under church ownership or sponsorship arrangements in partnership with the Government of Jamaica. Devotional exercises in such schools often reflect the religious traditions and teachings of the sponsoring denomination. Even within government-owned schools, devotions have traditionally retained a Christian character consistent with longstanding Jamaican educational practice.

At the same time, Jamaica is governed by a constitutional framework that guarantees freedom of conscience and religion. Schools must therefore ensure that devotional activities are conducted in a manner that respects the rights of students, parents, and staff, while preserving the traditions that have historically characterised school devotions.

These Guidelines have therefore been developed to provide clarity for school leaders regarding the organisation and management of devotional exercises while respecting Jamaica's educational traditions, legal framework, and the role of Christian faith in the moral formation of students.

Legal and Constitutional Framework

Devotional exercises in Jamaican schools operate within the framework established by the Constitution of Jamaica.

The Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms guarantees the right of every person to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This includes the right to manifest religion through worship, teaching, practice, and observance. The Constitution also recognises the rights of religious bodies to provide religious instruction to members of their denomination within educational institutions that they establish or sponsor.

The Education Act provides that the Minister responsible for education may promote education and contribute towards the spiritual and moral development of the community through education. Section 18 of the Act contains the conscience clause, which states that no student shall be required, as a condition of admission or attendance, to participate in religious instruction or

observance where the parent or guardian objects. Where such an objection is made, the student must be excused without forfeiting the benefits of the institution. The Act further provides that the school day in public educational institutions may include time for collective worship.

The Child Care and Protection Act further requires that the best interests and well-being of the child be a primary consideration in all matters affecting children. In this regard, due regard must be had not only to the child's physical and emotional welfare, but also to the child's moral and religious well-being.

Together, these provisions form the legal framework within which devotional exercises take place in Jamaican schools.

Definitions

For the purposes of these Guidelines:

Devotions refer to organised periods during the school day in which members of the school community gather for prayer, worship, scripture reading, singing, or spiritual reflection.

Collective Worship refers to devotional gatherings involving members of the school community for the purpose of religious observance.

Church-Owned or Church-Sponsored School refers to a public educational institution established or operated by a religious body or denomination in partnership with the Government of Jamaica.

Conscience Clause refers to the provision in Section 18 of the Education Act which protects the right of parents to request that their children be excused from participation in religious observances.

Visiting Devotional Leader refers to any clergy member, chaplain, pastor, youth minister, speaker, or other religious representative invited to lead or participate in devotional exercises within a school.

Statement of Principles for Devotional Exercises

The Ministry recognises that devotional exercises have historically contributed to the moral and spiritual development of Jamaican students and have formed part of the broader tradition of Christian witness within the education system.

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Jamaica's national motto, **"Out of Many, One People,"** reflects the diversity of the nation and the shared commitment of Jamaicans to live together with mutual respect and understanding. In the context of school devotions, this principle requires that schools maintain respect for the rights and dignity of all students, while not obscuring or undermining the Christian character that has historically informed devotional exercises in Jamaican schools.

Accordingly, the Ministry affirms that devotional practices should support the moral and spiritual development of students, reflect the traditions and ethos of the school community, respect the constitutional and legal rights of students and parents, and contribute to a positive, orderly, and respectful school environment.

These Guidelines are not intended to transform devotions into comparative religion exercises, nor to require schools to present all belief systems as equivalent. Rather, they are intended to preserve lawful devotional practice within a framework that is respectful, administratively sound, and consistent with Jamaica's constitutional order.

What the Guidelines Are Not Intended to Do

These Guidelines are intended to provide administrative support to schools and should not be interpreted as an attempt to regulate religious doctrine or worship practices.

They do not seek to prescribe the theological content of devotional exercises or interfere with the teachings of religious denominations associated with schools.

They do not prohibit legitimate expressions of worship consistent with the traditions of the school community and the denomination associated with the institution.

They do not alter the rights of church sponsors to provide religious instruction in institutions that they establish or support.

They do not promote omnism, universalism, or any other approach that suggests all religions are equally valid expressions of the same truth.

They do not encourage parents to withdraw their children from devotional activities, but simply reaffirm the legal provisions of the Education Act regarding parental rights.

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Government-Owned and Church-Owned Schools

The Jamaican education system includes both government-owned schools and schools operated by churches or religious organisations.

In church-owned or church-sponsored schools, devotional practices may reflect the teachings, traditions, and denominational ethos of the sponsoring church. These schools retain the right to preserve their established religious character, subject always to the rights protected under Jamaican law.

Government-owned schools may also organise devotional exercises as part of assemblies or gatherings of the school community, and such devotions may continue to reflect the Christian tradition that has historically characterised public education in Jamaica, while respecting the conscience rights of parents and students.

In both cases, principals and school boards play an important role in determining the organisation and conduct of devotional exercises.

Conduct of Devotional Exercises

Devotional exercises may take place during school assemblies or other gatherings of the school community. Activities may include prayer, scripture reading, singing, testimony, and messages of encouragement, worship, or spiritual reflection.

Schools may determine the format and structure of devotions in consultation with their boards and church sponsors where applicable. Devotional activities should be organised in ways that are appropriate to the age and maturity of students and that contribute positively to the school environment.

Devotions should be timetabled as part of the regular life of the school, and, where appropriate, notice may be given of special devotional activities or programmes involving visiting clergy or other external participants.

A copy of Section 18 of the Education Act should be printed in large type and posted in a conspicuous place in every public educational institution, and the Guidelines should be included in school handbooks so that parents and guardians are aware of the school's arrangements and of their rights under the law.

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Protocols for Devotional Exercises in Schools

Devotional exercises should be organised in a manner that reflects the traditions of the school community while ensuring the welfare, safety, and dignity of students.

Schools may organise devotional activities during assemblies or class gatherings and should ensure that such activities are conducted under the supervision of school staff. Where devotional exercises involve large gatherings, schools should ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place for student supervision, orderly movement of students, and safe use of assembly spaces.

Expressions of worship may vary among denominations, and the Ministry does not prescribe specific forms of worship. However, devotional activities should take place in ways that are appropriate to the school setting and respectful of all participants.

Where devotional activities involve gestures such as joining hands or other expressions of fellowship, participation should occur voluntarily and in ways that respect the comfort and dignity of students. Schools should ensure that students are not subjected to undue pressure and that the devotional environment remains orderly, respectful, and supportive.

Visiting Clergy and Devotional Leaders

Schools may from time to time invite clergy, chaplains, pastors, or other religious leaders to participate in devotional exercises. Such participation can enrich the spiritual life of the school community and strengthen the longstanding partnership between educational institutions and faith-based organisations.

Because devotional activities take place within the school environment and involve students who are minors, appropriate administrative procedures should be followed to ensure that visiting speakers are aware of the expectations and responsibilities associated with participation in school devotions.

Individuals or organisations seeking to participate in devotional activities within a school should submit a request to the Principal or the Board of Management, as appropriate. The request should normally be submitted in advance of the proposed activity and should include sufficient information to assist the school in determining whether the visit is suitable within the context of the school environment.

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The request should include the name, organisation, and contact information of the proposed speaker or group; the purpose of the visit and the proposed role in the devotional exercise; a brief outline of the message, theme, or focus of the devotional presentation; the proposed format of the presentation, such as sermon, prayer, testimony, music ministry, or motivational message; the proposed date, time, and duration of the devotional activity; and any special requirements or activities that may form part of the devotional exercise.

The Principal, in consultation with the school board or church sponsor where applicable, should review requests for visiting devotional leaders. In reviewing requests, school leadership should consider the suitability of the proposed presentation for a school setting, the age and maturity level of students who will be present, the alignment of the activity with the ethos and traditions of the school community, and any practical considerations relating to time, safety, and supervision.

Application and Approval Process

Approval for participation in devotional exercises should rest with the Principal or the Board of Management, in keeping with the governance arrangements of the school. Once approval has been granted, visiting clergy or devotional leaders should be informed of the expectations associated with participation in school devotional activities, including the school environment, the age of students, the time allocated for the devotional exercise, and the importance of presenting messages that are appropriate for students and supportive of the positive climate of the school community (**see Appendices I-III**).

Devotional activities involving visiting speakers should take place under the supervision of school staff. Schools may also maintain a simple record of visiting devotional leaders who participate in school activities, including the name of the speaker, the organisation represented, the date of the visit, and the topic or theme of the devotional presentation. Maintaining such records can assist schools in ensuring transparency, continuity, and accountability in the organisation of devotional activities.

Parental Rights and Exemptions

Parents and guardians retain the right under the Education Act to request that their child be excused from participation in religious observances. Where such requests are made, schools should make reasonable arrangements to excuse the student without disadvantage.

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Students who are exempted should remain supervised and engaged in appropriate activities during the devotional period. Schools should handle such arrangements sensitively so that students are not stigmatised or educationally disadvantaged by the exercise of their rights.

Parents should be informed at enrolment, and on request thereafter, of the school's arrangements for devotional activities and of their right to submit a written request for exemption.

Stakeholder Consultation

The Ministry recognises the importance of ongoing dialogue with churches and other stakeholders regarding devotional practices in schools. The Ministry therefore commits to continued consultation with church organisations, school boards, parents, and educators to ensure that these Guidelines remain responsive to the needs of schools and consistent with Jamaica's traditions and legal framework.

This consultative approach is particularly important given the role of churches in Jamaican education and the need to ensure that any administrative guidance remains both practically workable and respectful of religious freedom.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The effective implementation of these Devotional Guidelines requires ongoing oversight and collaboration among school leaders, boards of management, and the Ministry of Education, Skills, Youth and Information. Monitoring and evaluation will therefore focus on ensuring that devotional exercises are organised in ways that respect the traditions and ethos of the school community while remaining consistent with the legal and administrative framework governing public educational institutions.

School principals and boards of management will play a central role in overseeing the implementation of these Guidelines within their institutions. In carrying out this responsibility, school leaders should ensure that devotional activities are conducted in a safe and orderly environment, that the rights of students and parents under the Education Act are respected, and that the overall conduct of devotional exercises contributes positively to the ethos and culture of the school.

The Ministry, through its Schools Operations and School Improvement Services Branch, will provide general oversight of the implementation of these Guidelines as part of the broader monitoring of school operations and the overall school environment. Where appropriate,

guidance may be provided to school leaders to support the effective organisation of devotional activities.

Monitoring activities will focus primarily on administrative and operational matters, including the organisation of devotional exercises, the management of student participation, the handling of exemption requests, the approval and oversight of visiting devotional leaders, and adherence to the provisions of Jamaican law relating to religious observances in schools. Monitoring will not extend to the regulation of the theological content of devotional activities or the religious teachings of denominations associated with schools.

The Ministry will also remain open to feedback from schools, parents, church sponsors, and other stakeholders regarding the implementation of these Guidelines. Such feedback will inform periodic reviews to ensure that the Guidelines remain relevant, practical, and responsive to the needs of schools and the wider society.

Through this collaborative approach, the Ministry seeks to ensure that devotional exercises continue to support the moral and spiritual development of students while maintaining respect for Jamaica's constitutional framework, Christian heritage, and educational traditions.

Conclusion

Devotional exercises remain a valued tradition in many Jamaican schools and continue to contribute to the moral and spiritual development of students. These Guidelines seek to support schools in maintaining these traditions while ensuring that devotional activities are conducted in ways that respect the rights of all members of the school community and preserve the ethos of the institution.

Through continued partnership between the Ministry, churches, educators, and families, Jamaican schools can continue to nurture students who demonstrate integrity, compassion, discipline, and respect for others

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Appendix I: Application Form for Visiting Devotional Leaders

This form should be completed by any individual or organisation seeking permission to participate in devotional exercises or religious presentations within a public educational institution.

Completed forms should be submitted to the **Principal or Board of Management** of the relevant school for consideration.

Section A: Applicant Information

Name of Applicant: _____

Organisation/Church/Ministry (if applicable): _____

Position/Title (e.g., Pastor, Chaplain, Youth Minister, Speaker): _____

Address: _____

Telephone Number: _____

Email Address: _____

Section B: Proposed School Visit

Name of School: _____

Proposed Date of Visit: _____

Proposed Time: _____

Estimated Duration of Presentation: _____

Type of Devotional Activity (please tick):

☐ Prayer
☐ Sermon/Message
☐ Scripture Reading
☐ Musical Ministry
☐ Testimony/Reflection
☐ Other (please specify): _____

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Section C: Purpose of Visit

Please provide a brief description of the purpose of your visit:

_____
_____
_____
_____

Section D: Summary of Message or Presentation

Please provide a short outline of the theme or message you intend to share with students:

_____
_____
_____
_____

Section E: Activities Planned During Devotion

Please indicate whether the following activities will be part of the devotional exercise:

Prayer with students: ☐ Yes ☐ No
Singing or music ministry: ☐ Yes ☐ No
Student participation (reading, prayer, etc.): ☐ Yes ☐ No
Physical interaction (e.g., joining hands, laying on of hands): ☐ Yes ☐ No
Other activities (please specify): _____

Section F: Special Requirements

Please indicate if you require any special arrangements or equipment:

☐ Microphone
☐ Musical equipment
☐ Multimedia/Projector
☐ Other (please specify): _____

Section G: Declaration by Applicant

I confirm that the information provided above is accurate and that I will respect the policies, procedures, and expectations of the school during my participation in devotional activities.

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Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Section H: School Approval

(To be completed by the Principal or School Board)

Application Received on: _____

Decision:

☐ Approved
☐ Approved with Conditions
☐ Not Approved

Conditions (if applicable):

Approved by:

Name: _____

Position: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Administrative Notes for Schools

- Schools may request additional information where necessary.
- Approval of applications remains at the discretion of the **Principal or Board of Management**.
- Approved visits should be conducted under the supervision of school staff.
- Schools may maintain records of visiting devotional leaders for administrative purposes.

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Appendix II: Sample Devotional Schedule for Schools

This sample schedule is provided as a guide to assist schools in organising devotional activities in a structured and orderly manner. Schools may adapt this model to suit their own traditions, school culture, and operational needs.

Devotional exercises may be conducted as part of school assemblies, class gatherings, or other appropriate occasions during the school day. The format and content of devotions may reflect the traditions and ethos of the school community.

Daily Devotional Assembly (Example)

Total Suggested Duration: 10–20 minutes

1. **Opening Prayer (1–2 minutes)**
   A prayer offered by a teacher, student, or invited clergy member.
2. **Scripture Reading or Inspirational Passage (2–3 minutes)**
   A reading from the Bible or other inspirational text appropriate to the school context.
3. **Song or Hymn (3–5 minutes)**
   A hymn, gospel song, or worship song led by students, a choir, or staff member.
4. **Reflection or Devotional Message (5–8 minutes)**
   A brief message focusing on spiritual reflection, encouragement, or moral guidance.
5. **Student Participation (Optional – 2–3 minutes)**
   Students may be invited to participate through prayer, testimony, scripture reading, or musical presentation.
6. **Closing Prayer or Blessing (1–2 minutes)**
   A concluding prayer or words of encouragement.

Weekly Extended Devotional Session (Optional)

Schools may choose to hold a longer devotional assembly once per week or once per month.

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Suggested Duration: 20–30 minutes

Activities may include:

- Worship through music or choir presentation
- A guest speaker or visiting clergy member
- Student-led devotional reflections
- Scripture readings or dramatic presentations
- Moments of silent reflection or prayer

Schools should ensure that such activities remain appropriate to the school environment and the age group of students.

Classroom Devotions (Optional)

Teachers may choose to begin the school day or class sessions with a brief devotional moment such as:

- A short prayer
- A scripture reading
- A moment of reflection

These practices may help foster a respectful and reflective learning environment.

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Appendix III: Code of Conduct for Devotional Leaders

This Code of Conduct provides guidance for individuals who lead or participate in devotional exercises within public educational institutions. The purpose of this Code is to ensure that devotional activities take place in a manner that supports the positive development of students and respects the school environment.

Respect for the School Environment

Devotional leaders should conduct themselves in a manner that reflects respect for the school community, including students, teachers, administrators, and parents. Messages delivered during devotions should be appropriate to the age and maturity of students and should contribute positively to the school environment.

Respect for Students

Students should be treated with dignity, respect, and sensitivity at all times. Devotional leaders should avoid language or conduct that may cause distress, embarrassment, or discomfort to students. Students should not feel pressured or compelled to participate in devotional activities or religious expressions beyond their comfort level.

Appropriate Communication

Messages shared during devotional exercises should be constructive, encouraging, and appropriate for a school setting. Devotional leaders should aim to promote positive values such as respect, compassion, responsibility, honesty, and service to others. Content that is inappropriate for a school environment or that may undermine the well-being of students should be avoided.

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Physical Interaction

Where devotional activities involve gestures such as joining hands or other expressions of fellowship, participation should be voluntary and conducted respectfully. Devotional leaders should remain mindful that students are minors and that physical interaction should always be appropriate within the school setting.

Compliance with School Procedures

Devotional leaders should follow the procedures established by the school for participation in devotional activities, including the submission of the required application form and adherence to the approved time and format of the presentation. School leaders retain responsibility for the overall supervision and conduct of devotional activities within the institution.

Collaboration with School Staff

Devotional leaders should work cooperatively with school administrators and teachers to ensure that devotional activities support the positive climate of the school community. Where guidance is provided by school leadership regarding the conduct of devotional exercises, visiting speakers are expected to respect such guidance.

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