

Office of Equity and *Inclusion*

Fall/Winter 2011

Guidance on Issues Related to Religion and December Holidays

General Rule¹:

When a school chooses to acknowledge the December holidays and/or conduct other activities involving religion (i.e., opening meetings), it is important that the school never appear to endorse religion over non-religion or one particular religious faith over another.

Some guidance on this issue:

- * ***Public schools must remain free from activities that could involve religious coercion.*** Because of their young age, students are particularly impressionable and susceptible to pressure to conform to the beliefs of the majority. Schools must take care to avoid endorsing the beliefs, practices or traditions of the majority religion.
- * ***Schools must be careful not to cross the line between “teaching about” religious holidays (which is permitted) and “celebrating” religious holidays (which is not).*** Celebrating religious holidays in the form of religious worship or other practices is unconstitutional. Teaching about a holiday will be constitutional if it furthers a genuine secular program of education, is presented objectively, and does not have the effect of endorsing, advancing or inhibiting religion.
- * ***Special school events, assemblies, concerts and programs must be designed to further a secular and objective program of education and must not focus on any one religion or religious observance.*** Religious music or drama may be included in school events, but the reason for including that music must be to advance a secular educational goal. Such events must not promote or denigrate any particular religion, serve as a religious celebration, or become a forum for religious devotion. Students have the constitutional right to an excused absence or participation from such programs and events.
- * ***Religious symbols are not appropriate seasonal decorations in public schools.*** The classroom and school premises are the place where children spend the majority of their day. It is important that *all* students feel comfortable and accepted in their school. Symbols of religious holidays may make some students uncomfortable and feel unwelcome because their holidays and traditions are not represented or because they do not celebrate religious holidays at all.

¹ From the Anti-Defamation League (ADL).

- ✱ ***It is not advisable to rely on information provided by a representative child of a minority religion.*** Students should not be put on the spot to explain their religious (or cultural) traditions. The student may feel uncomfortable and may not have enough information to be accurate. By asking a student to be a spokesperson for her/his religion, the teacher is sending a signal that the religion is too “exotic” for the teacher to understand.
- ✱ ***Remember: diversity includes religious diversity.*** In designing holiday or any other school-related programming it is essential to keep in mind that the children entrusted to your care likely have widely divergent religious points of view. The way you approach the December holidays or any other activity involving religion will determine whether those children whose religious views fall outside of the majority’s are made to feel welcome and comfortable in their school building or whether they will feel as if they do not belong.

A calendar of religious holidays can be found on the department website for the Office of Equity and Inclusion. This calendar offers guidance with regard to special events that might be planned over the coming weeks. None of our programs should have the purpose, or effect, of promoting or inhibiting religion. Please review the calendar carefully, and as you schedule events at your respective schools, be mindful of the many faiths, belief systems and traditions represented by our diverse student and staff populations.

Tips for planning activities involving religion in our schools

Ask yourself the following questions:

1. Is this activity designed in any way to either promote or inhibit religion?
2. How does this activity serve the academic goals of the course, or the educational mission of your school?
3. Will any student or parent be made to feel like an outsider, not a full member of the community, by this activity?
4. Do we plan activities to teach about religious holidays at various times of the year or only in December?
5. Are we prepared to teach about the religious meaning of this holiday/activity in a way that enriches students’ understanding of history and cultures?

Please also be mindful of the email transmissions that are sent to fellow employees and friends through the District’s outlook network. Taglines after one’s contact information should not be used as an opportunity to promote a particular faith. District employees as well as students must understand that the use of DCPS computers, network and Internet service is a privilege. Questions related to policies, procedures and visual identity standards for the district should be directed to the Communications Department. It should be noted that in accordance with that Department’s Style Guide (July 2010) the only approved tagline is: Teaching. Learning. Achieving. (see page 7 of the Guide) All employees are responsible for adhering to the District’s commitment to creating an inclusive and respectful environment.

CHANGING OURSELVES, CHANGES THE WORLD