The December Dilemma

From the Jewish Community Relations Council

Every year, schools must decide how to recognize the holidays celebrated by their communities in the winter months. Some in the interfaith community call this the “December Dilemma,” because of conflicts holiday celebrations can create.

In order to avoid controversy and maintain an inclusive environment, most schools take one of two valid approaches in their winter programming: emphasizing non-religious activities or promoting multicultural ones.

Regardless of the policy your school develops, we at JCRC recommend reframing the “dilemma” into a positive: See this as an opportunity to consider the diverse community we live in now, with all its citizens, and all their cultural and religious traditions.

*See back for tips to prevent misunderstandings and encourage inclusive discourse at your school.*

Three Important Questions*

Ask the following 3 questions of your holiday lessons and activities.

1. Does this lesson or activity serve an educational purpose, and does it help meet the academic goals set for students?

2. Will any student or parent be made to feel like an outsider by this activity, concert, or lesson?

3. Is the curriculum fair and balanced, including a number of religious traditions?

* Courtesy of the California Three R’s Project*
Ensure Inclusive and Fun Winter Programming

Administrators

Put together a set of concrete guidelines about acceptable, secular lessons, music, décor, and activities, and distribute these guidelines to teachers and staff in advance of the holiday season. Make sure teachers and staff have an opportunity to pose questions and propose plans to the administration so they are an integral part and have a vested interest in the process.

Encourage holiday decorations and displays at your school sites that are seasonal and do not send a religious message.

Make sure to provide a means for students to opt out of holiday activities that include religious content (i.e. singing devotional music, like Silent Night) without being stigmatized by educators or classmates.

Teachers

Use the holiday season as an opportunity to teach students about a variety of religious holidays and how they are celebrated across the globe. Uniting these holiday lessons around a particular theme (e.g. lights, lighting candles) can help students focus on the common values that these cultures share.

Provide a variety of educational resources for children, giving students the opportunity to learn more on the subject of diverse cultural and religious holidays at their leisure.

Include music representative of a variety of cultures and religions during holiday concerts, and avoid music with specifically devotional messaging (e.g. references to God, our Lord, Savior, etc).

Consider decorating classrooms with student-made art, depicting the holidays that students celebrate throughout the year. This will motivate students to be creative and represent the diversity of the school’s community.

Put together a diversity calendar and encourage children to bring in global holidays for that calendar. This will help spread out intercultural learning through the year.

RESOURCES

Guidelines for holiday programming, provided by the Anti-Defamation League: archive.adl.org/religion_ps_2004/teaching.html#.U-FDMONdVuU

An Interfaith Calendar, including religious holidays of the world’s major religions: interfaithcalendar.org/index.htm

A helpful interview with First Amendment Scholar Dr. Charles Haynes: learningfirst.org/node/2289

Explanation of Jewish Holiday Observe: icsresources.org/curricula.htm

For more information visit www.jcrc.org