Winter Holidays: December Dilemma or Teaching Opportunity?

Winter is a festive time of year because so many holidays are celebrated by people from different religions, cultures and races. We spend time with family and friends, connect with our faith or culture, give and receive gifts and enjoy special foods and treats. However, this time of year—especially in schools and whether it’s in-person, online or hybrid—can be a time where some children can feel uncomfortable, excluded, insulted or marginalized.

Every November and December, public school students, parents, teachers and administrators face the difficult task of acknowledging the various religious and cultural holiday traditions celebrated during that time of year. While there are
appropriate educational benefits to teaching about the diverse religious traditions and cultures of our country, school officials must be thoughtful about being inclusive and ensure they do not give students the impression that one set of holidays or beliefs is more important or more acceptable than others.

Be accurate and sensitive
Religious and cultural holidays offer excellent opportunities to teach about culture, religion and their historical importance. During the winter season and especially in December, we celebrate

- Diwali (depending on the Hindu Lunar calendar)
- Hanukkah (depending on the Hebrew calendar)
- Winter Solstice (December 21)
- Christmas (December 25)
- Kwanzaa (December 26)
- Three Kings Day (January 6)
- Ramadan (depends on Islamic calendar and periodically aligns with winter holidays—next time is 2030).

In-person and online school related activities should focus on more than one holiday. In order to avoid student discomfort, do not put children on the spot and ask them to explain their own religious practices or observances or to bring religious objects to class as a basis of discussion. On the other hand, children and families who volunteer to share information about the holidays they observe and their traditions associated with the holiday can be a welcome addition to an in-person or virtual classroom discussion. Before allowing a student or adult family member to present information about their holiday observances, it is advisable to consult with your principal or administration regarding any related school or district policies.
Be aware that some religions teach that celebrating holidays and birthdays is unacceptable

Children should always be permitted not to participate and should have the opportunity to engage in other optional, enjoyable activities. For example, writing a letter to Santa may be uncomfortable for children who do not celebrate Christmas. Instead, consider activities which include all children. An option that is true to the spirit of the winter holidays might be to encourage children to write to store owners seeking donations for children who lack any toys.

Do not make assumptions

Children in our public schools represent a myriad of religions, cultures and traditions. Within those groups, not all members of the same cultural or religious group necessarily observe the same holidays or celebrate them in the same way. Many children, being multidenominational and/or multiracial, commemorate more than one holiday. For example, do not assume a Mexican child is Catholic, and therefore, must celebrate Christmas or that all Jewish students celebrate Hanukkah. Make sure that you do not treat some holidays as “regular” and others as different or “exotic” or that you introduce an ethnic group only in terms of its holiday observances. Multicultural activities that focus only on foods and holidays have been justifiably labeled the “tourist approach.” Better to share the holiday’s name, when it occurs, who participates and how this holiday reveals the historical experiences and culture of its followers.

Use holiday activities as a way to enhance respect for religions and traditions different from one’s own, but stress common themes, as well. For example, many holidays focus on festivals of light, including Christmas, Hanukkah and Kwanzaa. By connecting holiday themes, you communicate that all holidays are a valid expression of cultural and religious pride.

Be inclusive

In-person or online events winter holiday school activities such as assemblies, choral presentations and plays should be inclusive. Sometimes schools will host a
holiday concert that includes mostly Christmas songs and one Hanukkah and/or Kwanzaa song in the program. Be inclusive in your approach and do not endorse one religion or holiday over another. If you are putting on a holiday concert, be sure to include songs about Christmas, Hanukkah and Kwanzaa songs and be careful to not select songs with overtly religious themes. Songs should be chosen for their educational purposes, such as learning about rhythm, harmony, musical construction, etc. When you plan your decoration of hallways, classrooms, outside the school building and virtual spaces, make sure to include all the holidays or choose decorations which are more general in nature, such as lights (candles) or snowflakes. Similarly, if you decide to discuss and read books about the winter holidays, be inclusive of all the holidays we celebrate during this time of year.

And always remember that while this time of year may include gift giving, many families are on a limited budget and are not able to celebrate in this way. Instead, focus on traditions, history, culture and our connection to each other.

In addition to these considerations, there are laws regarding the constitutionality of permissible religious holiday observance in the public schools. (See Religion in the Public Schools: Teaching About Religious Holidays—“The December Dilemma.”)