



**SECTION: PROGRAMS**

**POLICY: 140.1**

**TITLE: RECOGNIZING AND  
TEACHING ABOUT HOLIDAYS**

**ORIGINAL:** June 12, 1995

**CURRENT REVISION:**

**LAST REVIEWED BY THE**

**COMMITTEE:** December 9, 2020

**I. PURPOSE**

- A. The study of holidays is a significant way in which children learn about the importance of culture. Traditions are highlighted and the similarities and differences in cultural practices are recognized. The commemoration of historical, cultural, religious, and patriotic events with ceremonies or festivals is common across cultures. Therefore, it is natural for teachers to recognize and teach about these events as part of the planned curriculum or because of the expressed interest of students.
- B. In our country we have four types of holidays, patriotic holidays like Veterans Day and Flag Day; historical holidays like Thanksgiving and President's Day; holidays that honor people like Martin Luther King Day and Mother's Day; and holidays having a religious origin. Studying these holidays can provide connections among the cultures of the world.
- C. A holiday may be studied in relationship to the five themes of geography: location, place, relationship within places, movement, and region. These themes may assist children in looking beyond the celebration itself to its historic, patriotic, or cultural background. Holidays may also be explored in relationship to the food, customs, landforms, and resources of the region.
- D. We celebrate holidays as members of families or citizens of local communities. We also celebrate holidays as a nation or along with others around the world. Listed below are some activities in which students may participate while studying holidays:
  - a. Researching holidays in order to tell specific information about their events and origins.
  - b. Constructing content maps or organizing information about different types of holidays and the reasons for celebrations.
  - c. Constructing timelines showing times during the year when holidays around the world are observed.
  - d. Constructing creative arts projects relating to specific holidays.
  - e. Listening to and talking with guest speakers who have a strong knowledge base for a particular holiday (i.e., senior citizens, recent immigrants).
  - f. Role-playing to encourage an understanding of the feelings associated with the celebration of the holiday.
- E. These activities are listed as examples only and may serve as springboards for a more extensive study of specific holidays.

## II. DEFINITIONS

None.

## III. POLICY

### A. Recognizing and teaching about religious holidays

- a. Supreme Court Justice Clark notes in a majority opinion written in the most prominent of school prayer cases, *Abington School District v. Schempp*:
  - i. The job of educators is to educate, not to instill religious devotion ... a person cannot be fully educated without understanding the role of religion in history, culture, and politics. And the law, constitutional or otherwise, is no impediment to the realization of this aim.
- b. The proper role of religion in the public schools is in the context of history and culture and its subsequent educational value and not in religious observance or celebration. It is obvious that religion is an important cultural value whose effects have been felt throughout history. Since the primary purpose of the public schools is to teach about the world that has been and the world that is, the part that religion has played in the historical and social development of humans is essential to the curriculum.
- c. When studying religious holidays, a conscious effort must be made to present information and materials that are representative of a variety of groups or cultures. Teachers must be alert to the distinction between teaching about religious holidays, which is permissible, and celebrating religious holidays, which is not. Recognition of and information about holidays may focus on how and when they are celebrated, their origins, histories, and generally agreed-upon meanings. If the approach is objective and sensitive, neither promoting nor inhibiting religion, this study can foster understanding and mutual respect for differences in belief. Teachers will avoid asking students to explain their beliefs and customs. An offer to do so should be treated with courtesy and accepted or rejected depending on the educational relevancy. Teachers may not use the study of religious holidays as an opportunity to proselytize or to inject personal religious beliefs into the discussion. Teachers should avoid this by teaching through attribution, i.e., by reporting "some Buddhists believe...."
- d. The use of religious symbols, provided they are used only as examples of cultural or religious heritage, is permissible as a teaching aid or resource. Religious symbols may be displayed only on a temporary as is as part of the academic program. Students may choose to create artwork with religious symbols, but teachers should not assign or suggest such creations.
- e. Before planning a religious holiday activity in a classroom or school, teachers should ask themselves the following questions:
  - i. Is this activity designed in any way to either promote or inhibit religion?
    1. How does this activity serve the academic goals of the course or the educational mission of the school?
  - ii. Will any student or parent be made to feel like an outsider, not a full member of the community, by this activity?
  - iii. Are activities planned to teach about religious holidays at various times of the year or only in December?
  - iv. Am I prepared to teach about the religious meaning of this holiday in a way that enriches the students' understanding of history and cultures?

### B. Holiday Celebrations in the Classroom

- a. Holidays provide excellent opportunities for children to increase their understanding and appreciation of a variety of cultural celebrations that serve important societal and group functions. Although there are a myriad of holidays to recognize, teach about, and celebrate, the five most commonly celebrated holidays in our schools are listed below with guidelines to provide consistency across our school district. These holidays are recognized and celebrated in a non-religious manner.
  - b. Halloween is a celebration of imagination and creativity. It is a time for children to dress up in costumes depicting popular characters of the past, present, and future. Celebrations of this holiday may also be reflected in the art and music programs as well. In order to provide a safe environment, weapons or other instruments of violence or aggression may not be worn as part of any costume and should be left at home.
    - i. In our elementary schools, Halloween is celebrated with parades and classroom celebrations organized by the teacher who may request help from parents/guardians.
  - c. The day before winter break is a time to celebrate the beginning of the winter holidays and the coming of the New Year. Since many religious holidays are also celebrated at this time of year, natural opportunities may arise for classroom discussion of these holidays. Recognition of and information about religious holidays may focus on how and when they are celebrated, their origins and histories.
    - i. In our elementary schools, the day before the winter holidays includes a classroom celebration organized by the teacher who may request help from parents/guardians.
  - d. Valentine's Day is a time to celebrate friendship. Students, by choice, may participate in Valentine's Day activities by bringing in a valentine for each classmate. Prior to Valentine's Day, the students will be provided with a list of all their classmates so that cards may be addressed correctly and no child is left out of the celebration. Classroom teachers may design other friendship activities such as the writing of friendly letters to classmates, doing good deeds within the classroom or school, or performing a community service.
    - i. In our elementary schools, Valentine's Day includes a classroom celebration organized by the teacher who may request help from parents/guardians.
  - e. The day before spring break is to celebrate the beginning of the spring holidays and the arrival of the spring season. Classroom teachers may design activities that illustrate the rejuvenation of our earth and encourage an appreciation of all living things. These activities, which are left up to the discretion of the classroom teacher, may be integrated with art, music, or the life science unit in the grade level science book.
  - f. The last week of school is a time when students and teachers celebrate the successes of the school year. It is a time to express appreciations, reflect on the attainment of goals, and think about plans for the future.
- C. Excusals from recognizing and teaching about holidays and holiday
- a. One of the primary objectives of public institutions of education must be to educate a student without either promoting or curtailing religious beliefs. Wissahickon School District tries to protect the rights of all parents/guardians to decide what is appropriate for the education of their children. Therefore, parents/guardians may ask that their children be excused from classroom discussions or activities related to particular holidays. Excusal requests that include the reason should be submitted by the parent/guardian in writing to the classroom teacher who will present the request to the building principal.

The building principal in cooperation with the Assistant Superintendent will be responsible for granting or denying the request for excusal. Alternative activities will be provided for children excused from classroom activities.

**IV. DELEGATION OF AUTHORITY**

None.

**V. REFERENCES**

None.