

M.S.A.D. NO. 75 Holiday Policy: Frequently-asked Questions

1. Why does M.S.A.D. No. 75 need a holiday policy?

The purpose of the holiday policy in our schools is to broaden the focus of study and discussion of many religions and cultures and their practices.

The population served by M.S.A.D. No. 75 is becoming more diverse, reflecting the growing diversity of Maine and the country. Students of various religious affiliations – Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim and other – inhabit our classrooms. Even within each of these religions, beliefs and practices associated with celebrations and holidays vary considerably.

The Board has implemented a policy on School Ceremonies and Observances (the “holiday policy”) with four goals: (1) to expose all children to different traditions and beliefs; (2) to place observations within an appropriate educational context; (3) to promote tolerance; and (4) to ensure that no child feels excluded by school activities.

There are many reasons for making these changes. As an educational institution, the District wants to prepare its students for living and working in a global world where they will encounter people of diverse backgrounds. As a public institution, the District must respect constitutional principles of separation of church and State. On a more personal level, the District does not want to undermine the faith of children who do not see their religion celebrated or represented in school.

2. Is the holiday policy necessary in schools that do not have children from different backgrounds?

Yes. We often do not know the religious, ethnic or cultural background of students. It would be inappropriate to single out individual students by linking a policy change of this nature to their presence in a school.

Eventually, all children in the District come together in the Middle School and High School. When they arrive and encounter students from different backgrounds, we want them to be familiar with and tolerant of customs and beliefs that are different from their own.

3. What is considered an appropriate approach to discussion of religious holidays in the classroom?

A broad range of educational activities that present a balanced view of different religions over the course of the year is appropriate.

Religious holidays provide an opportunity to teach about religious differences, history and culture. Exposing children to different religions and cultural traditions broadens children’s worldview and builds understanding of customs different from their own.

Broad-based units of study that investigate themes common to many religions and cultures are particularly useful. For example, teachers can explore celebrations that involve light, festivals of thanksgiving, seasonal celebrations of light and dark. A unit on celebrations that involve light could include Hanukkah – the Jewish festival of light; Tet – the Vietnamese New Year; Christmas; Divali – the Hindu festival of light and celebration of the coming New Year; and the Chinese New Year. The District will work to make available to teachers a variety of resources that facilitate exploration of themes of this nature across different religions and cultures.

4. Is the sharing of students' personal experiences relating to religious holiday celebrations appropriate in the classroom?

Yes, to the same degree that teachers allow sharing of students' personal experiences of any kind.

5. Can holiday symbols be displayed in schools and District buildings?

Religious symbols are appropriate in schools and other District buildings when used to illustrate a unit of instruction to which they are germane. Religious symbols should not be displayed outside this context.

6. Some symbols associated with religious holidays are not really religious symbols, so why can't they be used as decorations in District facilities?

Many cultural traditions have evolved from the celebration of religious holidays. For example, cultural symbols such as trees and wreaths may not have religious meaning to those who celebrate Christmas, but to those who do not celebrate Christmas, they are symbols of another religion. It is important to be sensitive to the challenges of being in a minority.

7. How does the holiday policy affect food in the classroom?

Food is often a part of religious holidays and traditions, and it is appropriate to use foods as a fun teaching tool. Food, when used in the classroom, should be offered in an educational context and should reflect the District's interest in teaching children healthy eating habits.

Implicit in the holiday policy is the need to be sensitive to children who have different customs regarding food. Some religions have specific guidelines or restrictions pertaining to diet. Teachers and schools should generally be aware of and support students' ability to observe dietary guidelines. For example, those observing the Jewish holiday of Passover adhere to extensive dietary restrictions for eight days. During Ramadan, Muslims do not eat or drink during daylight hours. District staff should make every effort to consider dietary issues such as these when scheduling special events involving food.

The District calendar will list important religious holidays, and the District will make available to teachers general information regarding dietary restrictions associated with different religions. Since

there are many different interpretations of dietary restrictions, parents will still be relied upon for specific requirements regarding individual children's needs.

8. How much are teachers expected to know about different holidays and traditions?

The District needs to better prepare teachers to teach about religious and cultural differences.

Each year, the District will provide teachers with a calendar of significant religious holidays. It will also provide resource material for teachers to answer questions they may have about particular holidays. District staff should make an effort when scheduling events to avoid conflicts with significant holidays.

9. How are teachers supposed to know they have children in their classroom who have special needs related to their religion or background?

As always, teachers should encourage parents to inform them of special concerns or needs related to their child's well-being in school. The District's intent in adopting the holiday policy is to create an environment that makes all children welcome, even when it is not aware of individual children's backgrounds since some parents may be hesitant to share information about their religious, ethnic or personal background.

10. Is it appropriate to use holiday-based stories for read-aloud and take-home books?

Yes. Holiday books can be used for read-aloud in the classroom, provided use of such books is balanced and promotes awareness of different religions. The District continues to develop a bibliography of books that reflect different religions and customs as a resource for teachers and will encourage efforts to make these books available in school libraries and classrooms.

11. Is it appropriate to have holiday parties?

Holidays are times of excitability and sometimes anxiety for students. Teachers and staff should work to reduce holiday-related fervor and anxiety that interfere with learning time. It is not the District's intent to discourage seasonal activities that reflect the educational mission of the school and contribute to students' mental health and school spirit. Celebrations and parties are appropriate when associated with the culmination of a particular unit of study or have some intrinsic educational value, such as a sampling of different cultural foods or exploring a particular set of traditions.

12. Is it acceptable to sponsor charitable projects, such as food and gift drives, during the holidays?

Yes, and efforts should be made to broaden charitable projects beyond individual holidays and to promote compassion and generosity at all times of year.

13. How should teachers and staff handle holiday music?

District staff should not discourage students from expressing holiday spirit in song at appropriate times. The District's "Sacred and Secular Music Policy" provides excellent guidance regarding the use of holiday music in the music curriculum.

14. Can schools include announcements of religious events in their newsletters?

Yes. Many school newsletters are a significant sources of community news – sometimes, the only source. The District does not wish to interfere with this important function. To avoid confusion, the District has asked schools to create a clearer distinction between school news and community news in their newsletters.

15. Does the holiday policy restrict teachers and staff from wearing clothing that expresses holiday themes?

No. Other than existing dress codes, there are no dress restrictions related to holiday observances for employees or students.

16. Does the holiday policy apply to Halloween and Valentine's Day?

No. The holiday policy was developed principally to address the observance of religious holidays in the District. Halloween and Valentine's Day are celebrated as secular events in our culture, so they are exempt from the holiday policy.