

Religious holiday celebrations in public schools (December 2013 School Leader Update)

“Have a holly jolly Christmas/it’s the best time of the year...” Hmmm, well, perhaps not for everyone. Public school officials need to be especially conscious at this time of year that the birth of the Christian Savior is not recognized or celebrated by all students and families. Therefore, here is a quick (not meant to be exhaustive) checklist of what public school officials are pro-hibited from doing and what they are permitted to do.

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a. Prohibited Activities

- Displays of religious symbols such as a crèche, an angel, a menorah, or a banner with a religious message (“Gloria in Excelsis Deo,” e.g.).
- Display of a Christmas tree with religious symbols such as stars, angels, the baby Jesus.
- School-wide prayer or Scripture readings.
- A musical concert with exclusively religious music.
- Banning students from offering candy canes or other items with a religious message during noninstructional time (before or after school or during a recess) and not done in the classroom. Schools may still prohibit distribution within classrooms.

Holding a “Christmas party” in the classroom. A “holiday” or “end of semester” or “end of 2013” party is OK.

b. Permissible Activities

- Including religious music selections during public holiday concerts if non-religious music is included.
- Holding holiday concerts at religious sites if the concerts are also held at non-religious sites.
- Displaying a “giving tree,” i.e. a tree on which students hang donated items such as mittens, gloves, etc.
- Displays of religious symbols when combined with other symbols of cultural and ethnic heritage such as Kwanzaa symbols, Frosty the Snowman, other festive figures, a “Happy Holidays” banner, etc.
- Displays of symbols representing many religious beliefs, even without non-religious symbols. But, just displaying symbols from Christianity and Judaism is an impermissible endorsement of dual beliefs. The display must present a message of pluralism and freedom to choose one’s own beliefs.