

TEACHING RELIGION,
HOLIDAYS, AND
TRADITIONS IN JEFFERSON
COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS



In Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS), the quintessential question to be asked every day is: "What is the educational purpose?"



Teaching is different than celebrating. As with all content, an equitable balance is to be taught as it relates to holidays and religions. Gleaning respect and understanding for holidays and religions is acceptable and expected, as long as a multivariate approach is employed and no beliefs or religions outweigh other beliefs and religions.

- To that point, below is guidance to ensure that culturally responsive practices are adhered to and that students of all backgrounds are taught through the action and intent that they are welcomed, respected, and valued.
- Students may not be censored by staff as they write or express the significance of their holidays (to them) as long as it is not disruptive or denounces other religions.
- Staff cannot mandate students to sing songs, watch movies, or participate in activities that conflict with the students' culture, value, or beliefs. If the class is studying religion, a culturally balanced curriculum that explores diverse cultures is expected.
- Schools may teach holiday music in their choral programs as to teach cultural relevance and/or if the song is part of a production. In JCPS, as we work to improve equity, we expect inclusive cultural (differing religious) songs to teach style, tempo, history, culture, etc. Further, a diverse compilation of different songs from different cultures allows access, evokes inclusion, and expands knowledge.
- In JCPS, responsiveness and inclusion are expected. In celebrating/teaching cultures that

you (the teacher) are not wholly aware of, exclusion and bias may happen. Evidenced balanced teaching, symbols, decorations, and recognitions are expected. Thus, the religious and/or celebratory beliefs that the majority of staff may believe in should not overtake or undervalue other religious symbols, beliefs, and traditions. Please note, cursory inclusion of religions and holidays that the majority of staff and students do not identify with is tokenism and still excludes students and families.

- Certain cultures and religious traditions do not celebrate holidays, such as Halloween and Christmas, and some students may need to excuse themselves from the classroom during learning activities. No student should be told to excuse themselves from class during a lesson, unless they wish to or have to. Consent from the guardian will be required before that is to happen. In JCPS, the expectation is to recognize all beliefs and to create spaces where all beliefs are a viable part of learning and where not encroaching on beliefs is taught verbally and through actions.

- Schools are to note that heritage is not always cultural practices. Relatives and multigenerational households can have family members/guardians who do and/or do not practice the traditions and cultures that their ancestors come from. No assumptions should be made about beliefs and practices. In JCPS, student voice and choice is paramount. Students should have the opportunity, in a teachable environment, to share their beliefs and values. In doing so, less assumptions are made and exclusion does not happen.

- Schools may teach students about holidays, including its religious significance on the basis of its historical importance. Proselytizing entails advocating for, promoting, and/or converting one religion/religious belief to another. Proselytizing is illegal/prohibited. To ensure inclusion of others' beliefs, equal depth to teaching and acknowledging different traditions and religions are expected.

- Teachers of any religious faith are not prohibited from expressing their views by wearing related clothing or carrying personal items, as long as it is not disruptive or denounces other religions.

- Schools can decorate offices, halls, and classrooms to represent holidays. In JCPS, to ensure equity and cultural competence, the decorations in halls, offices and classes must be equally representative of other cultures, religions, beliefs.

All principals and assistant principals participated in a religious diversity training. We encourage all employees to take the training. The link is provided. (<https://bit.ly/3we3nrU>)

The Jefferson County Board of Education (JCBE) is clear on making sure all that students belong and have a right to an education that bars prejudice, harassment, and discrimination.

Further questions? Contact Telva Hogan/DEP office at 502-485-3506 or email Dr. Monica Lakhwani at monica.lakhwani@jefferson.kyschools.us.

Points of Consideration

- Purely religious symbols in the classroom should relate to the curriculum and be temporary.
- Symbols/Decorations:
 - In the classroom should not promote a single tradition.
 - Should not ostracize any student or their family.
 - Should fit into the curriculum of the class or the overall educational mission of the school system.
- Ask yourself the following prior to proceeding:
 - Does the decor/celebration in any way promote religion?
 - How does the decor/celebration serve the academic goals of the course or educational mission of the school?
 - Will any student or parent be made to feel like an outsider and not a part of the school/class community because of the decor/celebration?
- If an object or decoration promotes religion or if a student/parent would feel excluded, then do not proceed.

Endorsement of a particular tradition over others should be avoided.

A young student is more likely to see curriculum as an endorsement. For example, the plot of the book *Elf on the Shelf* is set in Christmas and, hence, relates specifically as a Christian story.

Points to consider:

- Younger students may have trouble differentiating between endorsement of a tradition and education about cultural diversity.
- It is not a historical cultural tradition, therefore it is less educational.
- It leaves out families who don't believe in elves/Santa.

Schoolwide Winter Musical Performance/December Program Considerations:

During schoolwide gatherings/programs, avoid language that sounds prayer-like. Instead, use language that focuses on offering well wishes to diverse students.

Term prayer, in general, can be applied to many in the global religious traditions. However, it is not inclusive to those families with atheistic beliefs or no religious beliefs, and thus should be avoided.

Be cognizant of religious observances—No student should have to choose between their education and their religion.

Additional Resources:

JCPS Religious Observance Calendar: <https://www.jefferson.kyschools.us/node/5134>

<https://mountainstates.adl.org/the-december-dilemma-december-holiday-guidelines-for-public-schools-and-public-spaces/>

<https://tanenbaum.org/2022/10/17/what-is-the-december-dilemma/>

<https://www.learningforjustice.org/professional-development/the-december-dilemma>