

Religious Diversity and the Holiday Season

Bend-La Pine Schools is committed to promoting respect for the religions, beliefs, and customs practiced by all members of our diverse community. The upcoming “holiday season” is a great time for each one of us to reflect on our personal biases and how we might each contribute to a culture of representation, respect, and inclusion of all religious and non-religious members of our school and workplace communities.

The following tools and tips can be used for our collective reflection and professional practice:

1. Take stock of your surroundings:

Observation	Reflections/Notes
How inclusive is the language used when talking about traditions or events? (<i>Ex: Christmas break vs Winter break; Staff Social vs Staff Christmas Party</i>)	
In your holiday decor or activities (in the front lobby, staff lounge, classrooms, etc), how many different beliefs and customs are visibly represented, and which ones are missing? (<i>Ex: Christmas trees, Santa Claus, menorah, Kinara, cornucopia, Native regalia, Diwali oil lamps, sand paintings, Zodiac tiger</i>)	
What is the source of holiday-related visuals in decorations or curriculum? (<i>Cartoon pictures of Pilgrims and Indians; Google stock images; textbook photos; versus: Student-/family-generated art or photos; local artifacts</i>)	
Who are the expert voices that students are hearing from, to learn about new communities, people, and religions? (<i>Teacher-driven “Holidays around the world” lesson, versus: local guest speakers and family sharing, documentaries, read-alouds written by practitioners of the customs studied</i>)	
How many songs at winter concerts and plays are religious in nature? Which religions are represented, and which are missing?	
Who are the students who are “opting out” of holiday-related lessons or activities? What skills or learning are they pushed out of? How often is this happening to them?	
What family engagement activities are holiday-themed? What religions are represented, and which families or staff members are excluded? (<i>Christmas cookie exchange, Holiday Tree fundraisers, versus: winter-themed food drive</i>)	
What themed staff gatherings are scheduled for the holiday season, and how inclusive are these staff socials for colleagues of different religions?	
What respectful and non-judgmental communication do you hear from colleagues (in the staff lounge, hallways, etc) regarding religious and non-religious diversity?	

2. Be thoughtful with instruction

- Start with [this](#) checklist, to prepare for productive dialogue in the classroom
- Define and articulate what ‘respect’ looks like for each member of your class (or staff team), and create Norms together
- Uphold norms and model respect for adults’/colleagues’ religious affiliations, not just those of students
- Use proactive conversation Circle Protocols for structured sharing of individual perspectives and experiences
- Minimize or eliminate activities where some students, families, or staff might be excluded from participating based on their religion
- Broaden representation of the religions and belief systems acknowledged in your class or building, and include the throughout the year, not just during the Western “holiday season” (a complete list of holidays throughout the year is [here](#))
- Articulate *why* religion and holidays are coming up in the classroom: Ensure the topic is connected to your adopted standards, is developmentally-appropriate, and focuses on a comparative analysis between communities or the treatment of religious beliefs historically.
- **Remain *neutral* in the presentation of non-secular content—religions and holidays should be *studied*, rather than *celebrated***
- **...But that doesn’t mean ‘don’t celebrate’:** take every opportunity to celebrate our community—celebrate students and colleagues, growth and learning, effort and respect, and diversity and inclusion!

3. Respond productively to bias

- Re-visit established Norms immediately when respect is broken within your group
- Use structured Restorative Circle protocols to debrief
- End with [this](#) checklist, to reflect on professional learning
- Promptly report any bias incident [here](#)

4. Learn more

- Our state and country have a deep commitment both to the protection of religious liberty and to the separation of church and state. **The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states:** “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...” This means that the government may not actively or passively promote one religion over another, prefer religion over nonreligion, or express hostility or opposition to religion.
- **In Bend-La Pine Schools, we work hard to uphold this neutrality as well as the religious rights of all students, staff, and families; including the protection from discrimination, bullying, or harassment on the basis of religious or non-religious affiliation.**
- Bend-La Pine Schools Non-Discrimination Policy [here](#)
- Bend-La Pine Schools Treatment of Religion in Schools [here](#)
- Bend-La Pine Schools Equal Education Opportunity [here](#)
- Bend-La Pine Schools Equity Policy [here](#)