

MULTICULTURAL RECOGNITION RESOURCE FOR SCHOOLS ON CULTURAL EVENTS AND CELEBRATIONS

Background

Principals will acknowledge cultural events, festivals and celebrations in a respectful manner that promotes understanding of diversity.

Procedures

1. Guiding Principles

1.1. *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*

Section 2 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (the “*Charter*”) states:

Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms:
(a) freedom of conscience and religion...

1.2. *Human Rights Code*

The B.C. *Human Rights Code* also recognizes multiculturalism and religious freedom by prohibiting discrimination on grounds such as ancestry, place of origin, and religion.

1.3. *School Act*

The *School Act* requires that schools be conducted on strictly secular and non-sectarian principles. Section 76 of the *School Act* states:

76(1) All schools and Provincial schools must be conducted on strictly secular and non sectarian principles.

(2) The highest morality must be inculcated, but no religious dogma or creed is to be taught in a school or Provincial school.

Public schools do not promote or endorse any religion or creed, but seek to instill respect for diversity. Respect for diversity is a cornerstone of Canadian democracy and a value that is instilled in students through the public school system.

1.4. The *Statement of Education Policy Order (Mandate for the School System)*, OIC 1280/89, states that the goals of education include the following:

Human and Social Development – to develop in students a sense of self-worth and personal initiative; to develop an appreciation of the fine arts and an understanding of cultural heritage; to develop an understanding of the importance of physical health and well being; to develop a sense of social responsibility, and a tolerance and respect for the ideas and beliefs of others.

The goal of public education is to enable students to acquire the attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society. The Preamble to the *School Act* states:

Preamble

WHEREAS it is the goal of a democratic society to ensure that all its members receive an education that enables them to become personally fulfilled and publicly useful, thereby increasing the strength and contributions to the health and stability of that society;

AND WHEREAS the purpose of the British Columbia school system is to enable all learners to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society and a prosperous and sustainable economy;

- 1.5. In *Diversity in BC Schools: A Framework*, the Ministry of Education described these goals as follows:

The school system is expected to promote values expressed in the *Constitution Act*, the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the *Official Languages Act*, the *Multiculturalism Act*, the *BC Human Rights Code*, the *Employment Equity Act* and the *School Act*, respecting the rights of all individuals in accordance with the law.

The school system therefore strives to create and maintain conditions that foster success for all students and that promote fair and equitable treatment for all. These conditions include:

...

School cultures that value diversity and respond to the diverse social and cultural needs of the communities they serve.

School cultures that promote understanding of others and respect for all.

Learning and working environments that are safe and welcoming, and free from discrimination, harassment and violence.

...

School curriculum honours the diversity represented in families, communities, the province, the nation and the world....

British Columbia schools are developing strategies to promote mutual understanding and increased respect for cultural differences, and to take action against racism.

2. Cultural Events and Celebrations – Guiding Principles

- 2.1. Principals will acknowledge cultural events, festivals and celebrations in a respectful manner that *promotes understanding of diversity*. This may include classroom discussion about cultural events as well as activities connected with those events. The purpose of these discussions and activities is to promote cultural understanding consistent with the secular mandate of the public school system.
- 2.2. The goal is to strive for presentation of a variety of cultural traditions in schools, keeping in mind the diversity of the student population. The District strives to be sensitive to the cultural diversity of students and to represent the student population broadly when planning activities.

2.3. In learning about diverse customs and celebrations, the goal is to promote cultural understanding. Classroom activities associated with holidays or festivals are intended to be appropriate to the learning situation, the age and background of the students involved, and to serve the goals of respect for diversity and inclusiveness.

3. What is “Secular”: Definitions and Examples

3.1. Holiday displays, decorations and activities in schools will generally include secular symbols associated with holidays or cultural festivals, and are intended to reflect diversity within our schools.

3.2. “Secular” means non-religious in nature. Some holidays, such as Kwanzaa, are secular in origin because they are not connected to a particular religious faith. Some other holidays such as Christmas have religious origins but that are also celebrated as secular holidays. Many holidays with religious origins also have secular activities and symbols associated with those holidays.

3.3. Activities and symbols used broadly throughout the community without a corresponding connection to the religious origins of a holiday will usually be secular in nature.

Examples:

3.3.1. Secular symbols associated with Christmas include Santa Claus, Christmas trees, candy canes, gifts, lights, poinsettias, snowflakes, and bells. Songs such as “Frosty the Snowman” and “Jingle Bells” are secular because they do not have a religious basis. In contrast, a nativity scene depicting the birth of Jesus is a religious symbol. Christmas carols about the birth of Jesus such as “Silent Night” or “Joy to the World” are religious in origin.

3.3.2. Secular symbols associated with Easter include bunnies, ducklings and Easter eggs. In contrast, the cross or anything depicting the death or resurrection of Christ are religious symbols.

3.3.3. A secular symbol associated with Hanukkah is the dreidel. In contrast, the menorah is predominantly considered a religious symbol. A secular symbol associated with Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) is apples and honey which represents the hope for a sweet new year while a rams horn (shofar) is a religious symbol used during ceremonies on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and is intended to call the Jewish people to a spiritual reawakening on those days.

3.3.4. The District will add more examples to include additional cultural events, festivals and celebrations as the need arises.

4. Learning About Diversity

4.1. Learning about different cultures facilitates students’ understanding, tolerance and respect for the ideas and beliefs of others. Such instruction is presented objectively and is supportive of tolerance and understanding. This can include discussion about religious holidays and traditions where such discussions further a secular program of education. For example, in the context of a classroom unit about multiple religions and cultures, students may learn about religious symbols from various traditions.

5. Religious Accommodation

- 5.1. Recognizing diversity includes understanding that some students may have specific needs for religious reasons and that they may not be participating in some activities as a result.
- 5.2. When a student or parent identifies the need for an accommodation plan for religious reasons, the District works with the student and parents to develop an appropriate plan for the student in accordance with the Multicultural Recognition Policy.
- 5.3. Administrative Procedure 202 states:
 5. School staff, parents and students (where age appropriate) will, through a collaborative process, develop a written accommodation plan where the need for such a plan has been identified by the parent or student (where age appropriate). Appropriate staff will be made aware of all accommodation plans so developed.
- 5.4. Accommodation plans describe the accommodation for the individual student. The plan may include matters such as observance of major religious holy days, dietary requirements, religious attire, or participation in activities or events, even if those activities or events are secular. If an accommodation plan includes a restriction on participating in certain holiday activities, the plan is developed in a way that respects the individual request and also maintains opportunities available to other students to experience such multicultural activities.
- 5.5. A general resource available in schools with regard to religious accommodation is “Appendix 1 – Descriptions of Religious Requirements, Practices and Observances”, from *Accommodation of Religious Requirements, Practices, and Observances: A Guideline*. This resource was developed by the York Region District School Board and provides an introduction and overview of religious requirements associated with different religions.

Reference: Section 17, 20, 22, 65, 85 School Act
Employment Equity Act
Human Rights Code
BC Multiculturalism Act
Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Constitution Act, 1982
Official Languages Act
Accommodation of Religious Requirements, Practices and Observances: A Guideline
Diversity in BC Schools: A Framework
Statement of Education Policy Order OIC 1280/89

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