

Winter Holidays = Educating, Celebrating, and Appreciating Diversity

If you walk down the hallway of Engelhard Elementary in December, you will notice the brightly decorated classroom doors that depict holidays such as Kwanzaa, Ramadan, Christmas, and Chinese New Year. The door-decorating contest is just one of the ways that educators at Engelhard employ the holidays to celebrate the cultural diversity of their student body.

"We have a 20 percent ESL [English as a Second Language] population, which has really brought about an awareness of the different cultural celebrations that take place during the winter months," said Janice Bobo, principal of Engelhard Elementary.

According to Aukram Burton, JCPS District Multicultural Education specialist, one of the biggest mistakes new teachers make when they are dealing with the holidays is not recognizing the various cultures represented in the classroom.

"There are more than 60 different languages spoken in the district. Bosnian, Somali, and Arabic are in the top five. Many of those speakers are worshippers of Islam," noted Burton.

Whether your students are Islamic, Buddhist, or Christian, it is important to approach the holiday season in a way that honors the variety of religious perspectives and provides insight into the cultures behind the celebrations, said Burton.

The goal, according to Burton, is for no student to feel left out or put down due to his or her beliefs and for students to gain an increased understanding of various cultures. "We want to recognize and celebrate the diversity within the district," said Burton.

Teachers also want to be careful not to miss an opportunity to explore core content while educating about different cultures and traditions. "We are really focused on core content. Some teachers have students bring in things and discuss their traditions. Teachers tie this into geography by having students find the

area where the tradition is based on the map," said Bobo.

For information on religious observances, teachers can consult the *JCPS Principal's Planner*, which has holidays marked in the working section of the calendar. Teachers also may consult the Multicultural Connections Web page on the JCPS Web site at <http://www.jefferson.k12.ky.us/Programs/mcconnections/index.html>. This page describes a variety of faiths and their religious observances and contains links to multicultural educational resources.

Burton noted that there are a variety of tools teachers can use when dealing with religious observances in the classroom. "Parental involvement can be important. Some teachers have invited parents to cook foods that are germane to the celebration and to talk about the cultural significance of the foods," said Burton.

He cautions teachers to be sensitive to students' responses to the topic of religion. "Students should be given the chance not to participate in a manner that doesn't ostracize them for not taking part," said Burton.

Burton also warned teachers to go beneath the surface to explore cultures, instead of relying on religious icons to try to convey a message. "Those icons are just symbols that represent a larger philosophical system. You want to answer the question, 'What does that mean?'" said Burton.

He urges teachers to first understand the district's basic guidelines regarding religion in the schools and then to be creative in their approach to discussing different cultures and their observances.

"Our goal is to educate students about different cultures, celebrate our diversity, and learn to appreciate each other for who we are," said Burton.

Burton provided the following guidelines for discussion of religion in the schools:

First, the school may not establish any religious programs or activities. The purpose for all school programs and activities is instruction, and the overall effect should be non-religious. Your focus should be:

- instruction, not indoctrination.
- academic, not devotional.
- learning, not worship.
- balanced, not biased.

Second, the total school program must be neutral with regard to religion. It must neither embarrass nor penalize students because of their beliefs. The program should be:

- inclusive, not exclusive.
- pluralistic, not sectarian.
- instructive, not preachy.

Third, the school may teach *about* religion. Religion is integral to the study of history, social sciences, and the humanities. Religion must be studied objectively as part of a secular program of education.

Fourth, the school must refrain from interfering with students freely exercising their religious beliefs. The school calendar and programs should minimize conflict with religious beliefs and observances. Students absent for religious observances receive excused absences. They have the number of days they were absent, plus one, to make up work.

Finally, the school must have a well-publicized process through which citizens may obtain information or express concerns about religion in the school. The school should strive to:

- invite discussion, not discourage it.
- be open, not closed.
- be proactive, not reactive.

For assistance in addressing religious issues, conducting workshops and faculty-meeting conversations, identifying competent community members to make presentations, and facilitating school-family conversations, please contact the Diversity/Multicultural Education specialist at **485-7075** or the Compliance coordinator at **485-3341**.

"Neither Rain, Nor Snow, Nor Sleet . . ." The Payroll Goes Through

Even though no teacher likes having to make up snow days at the end of the year, sometimes these unexpected days off just happen. You may choose to roll over, go back to sleep, and later spend the day catching up on some schoolwork or tasks around your home. However, if that snow day falls on a payday, you may be concerned that the balance in your bank account may drop lower than the thermometer. What to do?

First, remember that in the fall your school secretary had you sign a form on which you received a list of snow-day paycheck distribution locations. On this list of locations are certain school sites that will be open on snow days for a few hours for you to pick up your paycheck or direct deposit slip. Paychecks are sorted by zip code on snow-day paydays and delivered to a designated high school that serves as a paycheck distribution center.

Frequently, several zip codes are assigned to one high school.

When you arrive at the designated school, make sure you have a photo identification, as you'll need that to pick up your paycheck or direct deposit slip. Paychecks and direct deposit slips not picked up by the close of the distribution hours will be mailed to your home address. Of course, if you've moved recently, make sure that the district has your current home address on file. If not, you may find yourself driving on slick roads to your former neighborhood to pick up your paycheck.