

Inclusion, Cultural Diversity and Religious/Faith-based Celebrations in School Communities

(Adapted from <http://www.ed.gov.nl.ca/edu/k12/inclusion.html>)

Creating an inclusive school culture is critical because our schools act as mirrors of the larger community. Teaching students, early in their development as citizens, about the importance and value of respect, belonging, and community, will ultimately help nurture inclusive communities.

An inclusive school culture starts from the premise that every member of a school community – students, staff and families – should feel that they belong, realize their potential, and contribute to the life of the school. In an inclusive school culture, diverse experiences and perspectives are seen as gifts that enrich the school community.

An inclusive school culture requires a shift in the attitudes of *all* the members of the school community as well as the development of policies and practices that reinforce inclusive behaviour. Real inclusion involves *actions*, not simply words. A real culture of inclusion is only possible when every member within a school community embraces it.

In an inclusive school culture diversity is honoured, learning supports are available and properly utilized, and flexible learning experiences focus on the individual student. There is an innovative and creative environment and a collaborative approach is taken. At the heart of inclusion is committed leadership and a shared direction.

Diversity in BC Schools: A Framework

(Excerpts from: http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/diversity/diversity_framework.pdf)

The *School Act* articulates the purpose of the British Columbia school system: 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.

To achieve this purpose, the school system must strive to ensure that differences among learners do not impede their participation in school, their mastery of learning outcomes, or their ability to become contributing members of society.

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.

Goals or purposes for Diversity include:

- taking into account visible and less visible differences among individuals and cultural groups
- encouraging understanding, acceptance, mutual respect and inclusion, in order to make school communities and society as a whole more equitable for all people

Goals or purposes both for Multiculturalism and for Aboriginal Peoples include:

- developing cross-cultural understanding to create sensitivity to and respect for difference
- eliminating racism – addressing the effects of historic, organizational, systemic and attitudinal racism by: working to create an awareness of racism; educating people about what they can do about racism; developing policies and strategies that take action against racism
- eliminating systemic and attitudinal barriers that prevent full and equitable participation in community services, employment and education
- developing culturally responsive services to meet the changing needs of the communities they are intended to serve, rather than expecting clients and consumers to adapt to prescribed services as they exist

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:

- *Equitable access to and equitable participation in quality education for all students*
- *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*
- *Decision-making processes that give a voice to all members of the school community*
- *Policies and practices that promote fair and equitable treatment*

VSB's Multiculturalism & Anti-racism Policy

(Excerpts from: <http://www.vsb.bc.ca/district-policy/aca-multiculturalism-and-anti-racism>)

The Board acknowledges that all members of the school community; staff; students, parents and other stakeholders, share the responsibility for creating a welcoming and inclusive environment which honours and respects everyone. It is the Board's responsibility to support all members in their efforts to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for all.

In recognition of the **Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the B.C. Human Rights Code and the B.C. Multiculturalism Act**, the Board accepts its responsibilities in promoting the spirit of the legislation. The Board recognizes that the principles of Multicultural & Anti-Racism Education are also embedded in the *Aboriginal Educational Enhancement Agreement* to which it is committed.

2014 November. Inclusion, Cultural Diversity & Religious & Faith-based Celebrations in School Communities. Compiled and adapted by Angela Brown, Education Consultant, Anti-racism, Diversity and Social Justice.

The Board is committed to:

- eliminating ethnocentrism, prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination and racism in any form;
- ensuring that all schools' Codes of Conducts make explicit reference to the prohibited grounds of discrimination in the BC Human Rights Code;
- supporting educational equity through the provision of quality programs for all learners regardless of their race, colour, ancestry, national or ethno-cultural origin or religion;
- supporting employment equity, through the provision of effective processes to recruit, retain and develop all staff regardless of the race, colour, ancestry, national or ethno-cultural origin or religion;
- creating a workplace environment that values and welcomes diversity;
- developing and supporting an environment that affirms, respects, reflects and celebrates the racial, ethno-cultural and religious diversity of our society.

Inclusion & Honouring Diversity in our School Community:

Questions for Consideration

(Excerpts from "Reflective Tool for School and System Leaders: Areas of Focus of Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy": <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/equityPlacemat.pdf>)

1. *What strategies do we use to create a welcoming environment where parents, visitors, and community members are respected and valued?*
2. *In what ways do our school and board foster reflection and dialogue among staff to help them challenge their own biases and stereotypes and to support their professional learning?*
3. *How do we foster open and safe spaces where students, staff, and families can engage in meaningful conversations about equity, diversity, and inclusive education?*
4. *How are we building leadership capacity to foster shared responsibility for safe, caring and inclusive schools across our schools and board?*
5. *In what ways are the voices, stories, cultures, and histories of our students, families, and communities included in our classrooms, curriculum, learning materials, groupings, displays, and resources?*
6. *How effectively do we identify and address barriers that prevent some students from fully participating in class or school activities, or from completing class assignments?*
7. *Do we effectively consider our school's diversity in the planning of co-curricular and extracurricular activities?*
8. *What learning opportunities exist to help students, staff, parents, and the community understand, identify, and address issues of equity, racism, and discrimination?*
9. *How are staff, students, and parents responding to incidents of discrimination, bullying, or harassment?*
10. *How do we foster among all members of the school community, including students, staff, parents, and community members, a sense of shared responsibility to create a respectful, positive school climate?*

Inclusive Holiday Celebrations in School Communities:

An Invaluable Teaching Opportunity

December is a festive time of year as many holidays are celebrated by people from different religions, faiths and cultures. It provides students with an invaluable opportunity to share the historical importance of cultural traditions and celebrations in their own lives as well as learn about the customs, beliefs and everyday lives of other cultural communities. However, celebrating specific holidays in a school may exclude some students, staff and families, based on religious or personal beliefs.

It is important to honour and include the religious and cultural traditions that are celebrated by the families within your school communities to ensure that one set of holidays or beliefs is not deemed more important or more acceptable than others.

Cultural, Religious & Faith-based Celebrations

Questions to consider prior to planning celebrations:

(Adapted from: <http://www.teachhub.com/how-handle-religious-holidays-public-schools>)

- *How does this activity reflect our school goals or mission?*
- *Might this activity in any way either promote or inhibit religion?*
- *Might this activity cause any student, staff, parent or family member to feel excluded, not a full member of the community?*
- *Are we aware of the cultural demographics and the nature and needs of the religious/faith-based families within our school community?*
- *Do we plan activities to teach about the cultural and faith-based celebrations of the cultural communities represented within our school? Are these celebrations taught at various times of the year (or only in December)? For example, are the Jewish holidays Rosh Hashanah (Sept 24-26, 2014) and Yom Kippur (Oct. 3-4, 2014) celebrated as well as Chanukah (Dec. 16-24, 2014)?*
- *Are we prepared to teach about the religious meaning of various cultural and faith-based celebrations in a way that enriches students' understanding of history and cultures?*

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

(Adapted from: <http://www.adl.org/assets/pdf/education-outreach/How-Can-I-Plan-Inclusive-Holiday-Celebrations.pdf> and <http://www.tolerance.org/article/problems-christmas-curriculum>)

BE INCLUSIVE.

- There are often school-wide events such as assemblies, concerts or plays that occur during the winter holidays. Some schools may host a holiday concert that includes mostly Christmas songs and one Chanukah and/or Kwanzaa song in the program. It is important to be balanced and inclusive in your approach and not endorse one religion or holiday over another. If you are organizing a holiday concert, be sure to include a relatively equal number of Christmas, Chanukah and Kwanzaa songs and be careful to not select songs with overtly religious themes. Songs should be chosen for their educational purposes, such as learning about rhythm, harmony, musical construction, etc.
- When you plan your decoration of hallways, classrooms and outside the school building, include all the holidays or choose decorations that are more general in nature, such as lights (candles) or snowflakes. Similarly, if you decide to discuss and read books about the winter holidays, be inclusive of all the holidays that are celebrated during this time of year by members of your school community.
- Be mindful that while this time of year may include gift giving, some families are on a limited budget and are unable to celebrate in this way. Instead, focus on traditions, history, culture and our connection to each other.
- It is important for teachers to be culturally responsive, utilizing materials and examples, engaging in practices, and demonstrating values that include rather than exclude students from different backgrounds.

BE ACCURATE AND AWARE.

- Provide students with accurate information through books, media resources and by inviting parents or members from the community to share their personal stories, experiences and beliefs. Involving parents and community members in school community activities in meaningful and genuine ways demonstrates inclusion.
- Avoid assuming that students are 'experts' on their religion or cultural celebrations. Children may be uncomfortable sharing information about their own religious practices or family traditions, and in addition, they may not have accurate information to share.
- Ensure that students have the option to not participate and have a suitable alternative.

AVOID STEREOTYPING.

- Be mindful that everyone celebrates holidays differently, even members within the same cultural or religious group.

- Be aware that some holiday customs contain stereotypes. Use this as a teachable moment to debunk stereotypes and discuss their harmful and hurtful nature.
- Multicultural activities that only focus on “foods, festivals and fashions” only share one level of culture and may reinforce stereotypes; it’s important to learn about the multi-layered aspects of the various cultures represented within your school community.
- Avoid treating certain holidays as “regular” ones, and others as “special” ones. Some cultures have been reduced to being “brought out” only on holidays, which presents a one-sided and “exotic” view of the culture.

LOOK FOR THEMES.

- Use holiday activities as a means to teach respect for customs, traditions and religions different from one’s own, while highlighting common themes as well.
- By connecting holiday themes, you demonstrate that holidays are an expression of cultural and religious pride and help students understand the commonality of certain human feelings, celebrations, etc.
- During the winter season and especially in December, there are a number of ‘Winter Celebrations’: Chanukah (depending on the Hebrew calendar), Winter Solstice (December 21), Christmas (December 25), Kwanzaa (December 26) and sometimes Ramadan (depending on the Islamic calendar).
- Focus on the ‘Celebration of Lights’ in the holidays of Christmas, Chanukah, Kwanzaa and Diwali
- *Holidays in Canada 2015*: www.timeanddate.com/holidays/canada/2015

BE MINDFUL THAT PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE SECULAR.

- Keep in mind that religious holiday observances are not appropriate in public schools (e.g. inviting religious leaders as guest speakers)
- While recognizing a diverse group of holidays validates children and their families, schools must be careful not to favour one religion over another—or religion over non-religion.
- The use of religious symbols such as a cross, menorah, crescent, Star of David, symbols of Aboriginal spirituality, the Buddha, among others, that are part of a religious tradition is permitted as a teaching aid, provided such symbols are displayed only as an educational example of the culture and religious heritage of the holiday and are temporary in nature. They may not be used as decorations.
- You may also find many ways to celebrate that don't have to focus on particular holidays: *The seasons have changed! We've been together for 100 days! It's Name Day and we're going to learn about everyone's name! It's Children Day and you're all going to share something about you!*