



Focus on Religious Freedom

The December Dilemma 2022: Celebrating Religious Holidays in Public Schools

“Mankind is a great, an immense family... This is proved by what we feel in our hearts at Christmas.” - Pope John Paul XXIII

December holidays are always a challenge and educators often receive confusing advice about how to treat religious holidays. The last decades of increased diversity in our schools have challenged public schools to deal creatively and sensitively with student populations representing many faiths and beliefs, secular and religious. Happily, research reveals that celebrating Christmas and other holidays in the classroom brings children and teachers closer together, builds community links, and improves pupils' learning. ⁽¹⁾

A good way to deal with the December Dilemma is to begin the season with a focus on an often ignored holiday: Bill of Rights Day, December 15th. It was established to commemorate the adoption of the Bill of Rights to the U.S. Constitution on December 15, 1791. Beginning the season with activities around the Bill of Rights offers an opportunity for students to reflect on the civic values of rights, responsibility, and respect that all Americans share as citizens, no matter their religious or secular beliefs.

Senior fellow at the Freedom Forum, Charles Haynes, recommends that before planning holiday activities in public schools, choral directors, teachers, and administrators should ask themselves three simple questions:

1. *Do we have a clear educational purpose?* Under the First Amendment, learning about religious holidays is an appropriate educational goal - devotionally celebrating is not.
2. *Will any student or parent be made to feel like an outsider by the concert, lesson or activity?* Most parents and students are fine with learning about religious traditions - as long as the approach is academic, not devotional.
3. *Is our overall curriculum balanced and fair?* December shouldn't be the only time sacred music is in the curriculum. Students should learn about religious music from various world traditions at other times in the school year." ⁽²⁾

Prepare, celebrate and evangelize the coming of our Savior

Let your December explode with joy as you anticipate the Birth of the Christ Child with a manger on your lawn, Christmas lights on your bushes, a glowing tree in your window, a magnet on your car, a lapel pin on your coat, a donation to the local soup kitchen, a gift under your church's Giving Tree and an enthusiastic "Merry Christmas" greeting for all.