

While schools strive to create environments where every student feels included, December activities can unintentionally marginalize students whose traditions differ from cultural norms. This guidance supports public school and nonsectarian independent school educators in ensuring that winter season programs include Jewish students and students from other religious and cultural backgrounds.

TEACHING ABOUT VS. CELEBRATING

The Educational Purpose Test

Before planning any December activity, whether an event, concert, or lesson plan, ask: “What is the educational purpose?” This simple question is key to appropriate programming.

The Critical Distinction

✓ Teaching ABOUT religious holidays is permitted in public schools including their origins, meanings, traditions, and cultural significance.

✗ CELEBRATING religious holidays is not permitted. Public school programming should not celebrate or promote any religious tradition.

Addressing a Common Misperception

Because Christmas imagery and celebrations are ubiquitous in American society, many view it as cultural rather than religious, leading well-intentioned educators to incorporate Christmas-related content without recognizing its religious nature. However, Christmas is a Christian religious holiday. Public schools should not incorporate Christmas symbols—including Christmas trees, Santa Claus, wreaths, and stockings—in ways that celebrate or promote the holiday.

Example: A teacher may include Christmas in a social studies lesson examining the origins, traditions, and cultural significance of winter holidays such as Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanzaa. However, a teacher should not create a math lesson asking students to calculate the dimensions of their Christmas tree, as this would exclude students who do not celebrate Christmas.

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Communicate Clearly with Families

Proactive communication helps families understand the educational intent behind winter programming. Send school-wide messages that use inclusive, non-religious language, state the educational purpose of any cultural learning, and clarify that participation in any holiday-related activity is optional.

Use Inclusive Language

- Refer to “winter concert,” “end-of-year celebrations,” or “winter break” rather than “Christmas show,” “Christmas party,” or “Christmas break.”
- Use thematic frameworks—gratitude, light, community, kindness, or seasonal change—to create meaningful programming without privileging any religious tradition.
- Avoid messaging that favors Christmas or treats Christianity as the cultural norm.

Proactive Recommendations

Engage your school community in developing winter holiday policies before issues arise. Educate students about religious and cultural observances year-round. When major holidays like Rosh Hashanah, Passover, Diwali, and Ramadan are acknowledged throughout the year, December becomes less fraught. Reference [AJC’s Guide to Jewish Culture, Traditions, and 5-Year Calendar](#)¹ to learn more about the Jewish holidays.

INCLUSIVE ACTIVITIES AND PRACTICES

Ensure All Activities Include All Students

Design classroom activities that include all students from the outset. When activities must be optional, provide equally engaging alternatives that don’t single out or isolate non-participating students. Keep activities educational and welcoming, and if using religious symbols in educational materials, give equal weight to multiple traditions. Focus on traditions, history, and culture—not gift-giving.

Example: Instead of “writing a letter to Santa,” have students write letters seeking donations for local families or children in need, which emphasizes community support and generosity while including everyone.

Avoid Stereotypes and Tokenism

- Don’t ask Jewish students to present, explain, or represent their holiday or identity, or to bring religious objects to class. However, students and families who volunteer to share can be a welcome addition to classroom discussion. Teachers should consult the administration first regarding school policies.

¹ [AJC.org/5YearCalendar](https://www.ajc.org/5YearCalendar)

GUIDANCE FOR K-12 SCHOOLS ON INCLUSIVE DECEMBER ACTIVITIES

- Avoid tokenizing approaches that reduce rich cultural traditions to holiday symbols, foods, or festivals alone (e.g., reducing Hanukkah to dreidels or menorahs). Instead, share how observances reveal historical experiences, values, and the lived reality of diverse communities.
- Don't assume religion or observance based on students' backgrounds. For example, not all Jewish students celebrate Hanukkah in the same way, and students may come from multifaith homes where they celebrate more than one holiday.

Ensure teachers understand that:

[Hanukkah](#)² is a minor Jewish holiday that has gained prominence due to its proximity to Christmas. While culturally significant, it should not be treated as Judaism's central observance. Jewish identity includes religious, ethnic, cultural, and national dimensions, and families may observe holidays differently.

PERFORMANCES AND DECORATIONS

Music and Performances

Winter concerts should use secular seasonal music or multicultural selections that do not elevate any one faith tradition. Teachers should communicate with families before performances regarding the educational rationale, explaining what students are learning and why specific pieces were chosen.

Example: If a winter concert includes songs in other languages, educators should explain why that piece was selected (e.g., to introduce global musical traditions or study specific musical elements) and provide a translation.

If including religiously connected songs for educational purposes, ensure that:

- Multiple traditions are represented in an educational fashion.
- Participation is voluntary with equally engaging alternatives provided.

- Songs are chosen for their educational purposes (e.g., learning about rhythm and harmony, historical significance, or cultural exploration) rather than religious promotion.

Decorations

- Keep school hallways, classrooms, and shared spaces themed to the winter season and school values.
- Avoid decorations that reference, resemble, or replicate religious symbols or practices.

RESPECTING JEWISH STUDENTS' NEEDS

Attendance and Scheduling

Avoid scheduling major exams, performances, or mandatory evening activities on [Jewish holidays](#)³ (including the first and last night of Hanukkah).

Note: Though Hanukkah is a minor Jewish religious holiday, it holds major cultural significance for many Jewish families who prioritize communal celebrations and gathering with extended family.

CONCLUSION

Ensuring every student feels included during winter programming requires thoughtful planning and intentionality. When educators ground December activities in educational purpose rather than religious promotion, use inclusive language, ensure voluntary participation, avoid assumptions about students' backgrounds, communicate plans to families in advance, and acknowledge diverse observances year-round, they transform a potentially marginalizing period into opportunities for learning that welcome all students.

WE ARE HERE TO HELP

AJC's [Center for Education Advocacy](#)⁴ partners with schools to foster understanding of the Jewish people, combat antisemitism, and help build school environments resilient against all forms of hate. Find more resources on our [Campus Resource Hub](#)⁵. For consultation, educational programming, or to discuss specific challenges, contact: Education@AJC.org.

² www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hanukkah/

³ AJC.org/5YearCalendar

⁴ AJC.org/CEA

⁵ AJC.org/CampusResources