



Dear Superintendent _____:

The holiday season is fast approaching. Across the state students and their families will be celebrating various holidays including Christmas, Hanukkah, Bodhi Day, Kwanza, Eid al Adha, Winter Solstice, Christmas and New Years.

Schools naturally recognize the holiday season with their own celebrations and we welcome such celebrations. We do ask, however, that public schools remember their purpose in the lives of children when planning such celebrations, as described in the following case:

Designed to serve as perhaps the most powerful agency for promoting cohesion among a heterogeneous democratic people, the public school must keep scrupulously free from entanglement in the strife of sects. The preservation of the community from divisive conflicts, of Government from irreconcilable pressures by religious groups, of religion from censorship and coercion however subtly exercised, requires strict confinement of the State to instruction other than religious, leaving to the individual's church and home, indoctrination in the faith of his choice.

McCullum v. Board of Education, 333 U.S. 203, 216 -- 217 (1948)

As you are well aware, the founders of the United States of America believed in the importance of religion. They, however, understood that religion belonged not within the realm of government, but within the realm of individuals, families, and religious institutions. Today's courts echo the founders' sentiments:

The place of religion in our society is an exalted one, achieved through a long tradition of reliance on the home, the church and the inviolable citadel of the individual heart and mind. We have come to recognize through bitter experience that it is not within the power of government to invade that citadel, whether its purpose or effect be to aid or oppose, to advance or retard. In the relationship between man and religion, the State is firmly committed to a position of neutrality.

Abington School District v. Schempp, 374 U.S. 203, 226 (1963).

While public schools can teach about religion and religious holidays, public schools may not engage in indoctrination. Thus comparative religion courses can be taught but endorsing religious doctrine or sponsoring religious activities is unconstitutional.

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We welcome holiday celebrations that teach children about a variety of holidays. We believe, however, that holiday celebrations that focus primarily on one religious holiday can result in indoctrination as well as a sense within students who do not share that religion of being outsiders to the school. Similarly, we welcome holiday celebrations that share secular symbols such as Santa Claus or dreidels but we believe that holiday celebrations that focus on religious symbols can likewise result in indoctrination and the exclusion of students. The families of your students trust that you will work to ensure that this does not happen, as expressed below:

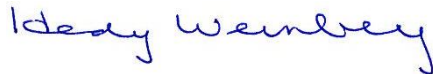
Families entrust public schools with the education of their children, but condition their trust on the understanding that the classroom will not purposely be used to advance religious views that may conflict with the private beliefs of the student and his or her family.

Edwards v. Aguillard, 482 US 578, 584 (1986)

During the holiday season, it is especially important that we all embrace the constitutional guarantees of the First Amendment in order to ensure that religious freedom flourishes. We ask that if you hold holiday celebrations at your schools, please make sure that they are inclusive and that all students can participate in them.

Please feel free to call me at 615-320-7142 if you have any questions or concerns.

Wishing you a healthy and happy holiday season,



Hedy Weinberg
Executive Director