

Sample Scenarios:

1. Muslim's parents complain about a December holiday lesson limited to Christmas and Hanukkah

Ms. Thomas, a fourth grade teacher, taught a holiday lesson in December which included a brief historical review of Christmas, a discussion of art memorializing the birth of Jesus Christ, and a study of Christmas carols in the designated music period. Ms. Thomas also told the class about Hanukkah, the Maccabee warriors and the menorah oil that lasted eight days, and passed around a dreidel to help the class understand the Jewish holiday. The parents of James Mitchell, a Muslim student in her class, complained to the principal that Ms. Thomas only included Christianity and Judaism in her holiday lesson, and ignored their child's faith completely.

Was the holiday lesson appropriate? What should the principal do to remedy the concerns of James Mitchell's parents?

The holiday lesson plan was appropriate according to legal standards. However, the Muslim religion's holidays, as well as holidays of other religious minorities, should be included in the holiday lesson plan to reflect the true diversity of religions in our culture.

2. Sixth-grader seeks to be excused from performing in December concert that includes secular and religious songs

An elementary school choir is performing a holiday concert in December which includes secular seasonal songs such as "Jingle Bells" and religious songs such as "Silent Night." Deborah Perry, a sixth grade member of the school choir, asks to be excused from singing at the concert since participation would violate her religious beliefs. Deborah's parents complain to school officials that the holiday concert is unconstitutional because it features religious songs.

How should school officials resolve this situation?

The school concert may constitutionally include some religious songs provided that the concert features mostly secular songs, and that the concert as a whole is primarily educational, secular, objective and nondenominational. However, Deborah Perry's participation should be voluntary, and therefore she should be excused from participation in the concert. Deborah's grade or school record should not be affected by her decision not to participate.