Holidays in the Public Schools: Halloween

Dr. Margaret Hill

Halloween has raised issues of religious liberty in public schools. Many see the costumes and spooky pranks as harmless fun, while others believe that the holiday derives from and celebrates pagan superstition while glorifying occult and satanic forces. Because Halloween is such a popular holiday with children, schools are caught in the middle. What are the issues and what is the best way to handle them?

How Can Schools Recognize Halloween in a Constructive Manner?

Since the whole controversy over Halloween emerges from the First Amendment, it would be a good time to review with students the first 16 words of the amendment and the rights it protects. The First Amendment Center’s pamphlet Teaching About Religion in American Life: A First Amendment Guide can help you understand and explain how the First Amendment applies to these issues in a school setting.

As with other conflicts related to religion and holidays, it is best to remember the academic purpose of schools. We can ask ourselves how the holiday can provide a venue for curriculum and grade-level appropriate learning experiences for students. For example, classes might want to learn about the history of Halloween while comparing and evaluating different interpretations of that history. Alternately, classes might just study the origins of certain aspects of the holiday, like the idea of carving pumpkins. Schools could also examine different ways that cultures around the world have acknowledged and celebrated the harvest or the transition from summer to winter.

Go Easy on the Graveyard Decor

To avoid offending students and parents with sensitivities about the holiday, it may be best to go lightly on the witchcraft, ghost, or graveyard decorations.
Instead, emphasize the harvest or fall aspects by featuring pumpkins, leaves, and scarecrows.

Lastly, student enthusiasm for “dressing up” could become a time for more academic pursuits. They can learn about and interpret characters from literature or history by dressing in costumes portraying those characters. To make it more academic, students also could be asked to share orally or in writing about the achievements of their character or discuss in what manner their costume is authentic for a particular time or place.

For reference, the California Three Rs Project recommends “Halloween activities in schools can be divisive” by Charles Haynes, available through the First Amendment Center. (Please see below.) Dr. Haynes’ article explains the areas of conflict and offers suggestions.

The California Three Rs Project is co-sponsored by Constitutional Rights Foundation, California County Superintendents Educational Services Association, and the Religious Freedom Education Project at the Newseum. This and other resources of the California Three Rs Project are available at cosproject.org. Special thanks to CRF Board reviewer, Rachel Lerman.

**Web Resources**

**First Amendment Center: “Halloween activities in schools can be divisive”**
http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/halloween-activities-in-schools-can-be-divisive
This speech by Charles Haynes, current director of the Religious Freedom Education Project, provides a good overview of the religious-freedom issues that Halloween can pose for public schools.

**Hairstyle History**
http://www.costumegallery.com/hairstyles
Here are pictures and examples of hairstyles from various eras that compliment historical era costumes.

**Halloween: The Fantasy and Folklore of All Hallows**
http://www.loc.gov/folklife/halloween.html
Writing for The American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, Jack Santino offers evidence for connections between Halloween and the Celtic harvest festival of Samhain (pronounced sah-ween).

**Harvest Around the World**
http://www.harvestfestivals.net/harvestfestivals.htm
Teachers will find harvest information about practically any culture or time period that they may be studying.

**Harvest Festivals in Ancient Cultures**
http://www.twilightbridge.com/hobbies/festivals/thanksgiving/harvest.htm

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Sixth grade teachers, here is the fall festival site for you.

**History of Costume by Braun & Schneider**
http://www.siue.edu/COSTUMES/history.html
This reference is an online book with illustrations and descriptions of costumes from around the world from ancient times to the 19th century.

**Origins of Halloween**
http://www.history.com/topics/halloween
This History Channel site provides a brief overview of the history of Halloween from ancient times to modern traditions. It links to other articles and videos.

**A Quick Guide to the Origin and History of Halloween**
http://urbanlegends.about.com/od/halloween/a/History-Of-Halloween.htm
As a counterpoint to Jack Santino’s article above, David Emery at about.com offers evidence to show that it is an overstatement to say that Halloween as we know it today has evolved from earlier Irish pagan festivals, such as Samhain.

**Top 10 Historical Costumes - American History**
http://www.costumegallery.com/hairstyles
This site shows children dressed like Ben Franklin, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and others.

**Why Do We Wear Costumes and Trick-or-Treat on Halloween?**
http://urbanlegends.about.com/od/halloween/a/Why-Do-We-Wear-Costumes-Halloween.htm
In addition to the traditional connections made between Halloween to the Christian holidays of All Saints Day (November 1) and All Souls Day (November 2), this article by David Emery describes the possible relationship between Halloween and Guy Fawkes or Bonfire Night in Britain.

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**Web Lessons**

**English Teaching Materials for Halloween – Canterville Ghost by Oscar Wilde**
Here is an easy and a full version of the famous Oscar Wilde classic, supported by language-development activities.

**ESL Kids Halloween Games**
http://www.eslkidstuff.com/HalloweenGames.htm#VDxJglcOezF
This page has a selection of Halloween games and activities that can be used in an ESL classroom. Some have specific teaching content functions; others are just for fun and language development.

**Halloween Creative Writing Project**
http://lessons.atozteteacherstuff.com/143/halloween-creative-writing-project/
Creative Writing: Halloween Theme (2nd Grade)
In these activities, students write creatively about pumpkins or from a pumpkin or Jack O’Lantern’s point of view. They create class books.

Halloween Lesson Ideas
Here is a list of lesson activities for various grade levels and subject areas related to Halloween.

Harvest/Pumpkin Poems and Songs
Here are a variety of poems and songs for fall, mostly for young children.

Scarecrow Thematic Unit
http://www.teachingheart.net/scarecrow.html
Here are songs, poems and children’s books with activities related to scarecrows and other harvest symbols for young children.

Seasons
http://teacher.scholastic.com/lessonrepro/k_2theme/seasons.htm
This Scholastic page links to activities about seasons, fall leaves, and harvest.

Storyboard of The Biggest Pumpkin Ever
http://www.angelfire.com/il2/normalugulyas/STT0003.html
This language arts lesson uses Steven Kroll’s book The Biggest Pumpkin Ever to teach sequencing of events.

Tissue Leaf Rubbings
http://lessons.atozteacherstuff.com/323/tissue-leaf-rubbings/
Connect the harvest with visual arts and literature at this site.

Why Do Fall Leaves Change Color?
http://na.fs.fed.us/fhp/pubs/leaves/leaves.shtm
Learn the science behind why leaves change color in the fall.

The material above is available at the California Three Rs Project (CA3Rs) website at ca3rsproject.org. For further information contact the CA3Rs office:

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