



The California Three Rs Project

Rights, Responsibility, and Respect

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.



Fall cornucopia. (Flickr Commons/Ron Cogswell, made available under an [Attribution 2.0 Generic license](#))

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.

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 ca3rsproject.org. Special thanks to CRF Board reviewer, Rachel Lerman.

Web Resources

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>

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.

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.

Web Lessons

English Teaching Materials for Halloween – Canterville Ghost by Oscar Wilde

<http://www.ego4u.com/en/teach-in/cultural-studies/halloween>

Here is an easy and a full version of the famous Oscar Wilde classic, supported by language-development activities.

Halloween Creative Writing Project

<http://lessons.atozteacherstuff.com/143/halloween-creative-writing-project/>

In this activity, students write creatively about pumpkins or from a pumpkin or Jack O'Lantern's point of view. They create class books.

Halloween Lesson Ideas

<http://www.educationworld.com/holidays/archives/halloween.shtml>

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

Harvest/Pumpkin Poems and Songs

<http://teachers.net/lessons/posts/202.html>

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.

Storyboard of *The Biggest Pumpkin Ever*

<http://www.angelfire.com/il2/normalugogulyas/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?

<https://www.esf.edu/pubprog/brochure/leaves/leaves.htm>

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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