



The California Three Rs Project

Rights, Responsibility, and Respect

Holidays in the Public Schools: Day of the Dead

Dr. Margaret Hill

To honor the contributions of Mexican Americans to the rich cultural tapestry of the United States, many schools include Día de los Muertos (“Day of the Dead”) activities during the first couple of days of November. Some people have argued that schools should not teach students about Day of the Dead because it is a religious holiday whose celebration is prohibited by church-state separation under the First Amendment. These challenges to celebrating the holiday are confusing to many teachers who have been working hard to make school a welcome place for students of all cultures. A greater understanding of the history of this major Mexican American holiday and of the First Amendment will help educators decide the best way to teach it.

The Origin and Symbols of Día de los Muertos

Historians trace the origin of the holiday to indigenous observances dating back thousands of years and to a month-long Aztec celebration dedicated to Mictecacihuatl (pronounced “Meek-teka-see-wahdl”), the goddess of death. The Spanish priests who accompanied the conquering soldiers with the goal of spreading Christianity in America considered the Aztecs’ practice a macabre celebration of death. Gradually, the Spanish priests merged the Mictecacihuatl festival with the Catholic Christian celebrations of All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day and moved the date for the holiday from August to November



A family altar in Oaxaca, Mexico. (Norma Hawthorne, [Oaxaca Cultural Navigator LLC](#)/Erin Loughran, made available under an [Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#).)

1 and 2 when these Catholic celebrations occurred. The result was a merged Native American and Christian religious tradition, which is celebrated today in Mexico, parts of Central America, the United States, and regions of Canada as Día de los Muertos, or “Day of the Dead.”

Celebrations differ by region in Mexico and Central America as people honor and welcome the spirits of their loved ones, and they also vary in the United States. Day of the Dead festivities usually begin with the building of an arched *ofrenda*, or altar. In addition to sacred images and objects, the altar displays portraits, foods, special possessions, and symbolic artifacts representing memories of the loved one to whom it is dedicated. The colors used on the altar have specific meanings. Skulls, or *calaveras*, symbolize death and rebirth, special bread (*pan de muerto*) represents the souls of the dead, incense represents the changing of the physical to the spiritual, and salt and water represent ongoing life. Candles represent light, faith, and hope. Fresh flowers, especially marigolds, represent the impermanence of life.



Miniature calacas. (Flickr Commons/Infelix, made available under an [Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 Generic License](#).)

In some places, families spend the day at the cemetery where their loved ones are buried. They decorate gravesites with marigolds, candles, and sometimes incense. People may bring toys for dead children (usually on November 1) or bottles of liquor to adults (usually on November 2), and have picnics next to gravesites, eating the favorite food of their loved ones. Most festivals feature calaveras, which once symbolized death and rebirth to the ancient people. Calaveras are often made of sugar or clay. In some regional celebrations of Día De Los Muertos, people wear wooden skull masks called *calacas* (skeletons) and dance to honor their deceased relatives. Skeletal figurines are also called calacas.

How Should Schools Teach students About Day of the Dead?

The culture and history of Day of the Dead provide an incredibly rich opportunity for learning, but public schools are institutions representing government and must avoid infringing on the constitutional rights of students and their families. Teachers must be careful not to cross the line between *teaching about* religious holidays (which is permitted) and *celebrating* religious holidays (which is not). Teaching about a religious holiday is constitutional if it furthers a genuine secular

program of education, is presented objectively, and does not have the effect of advancing religion through simulation or participation in a sacred ritual or practice.

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.

Questions to Ask

Teachers and administrators should ask themselves the following questions as they plan holiday lessons and activities:

1. Do I have a distinctly secular educational purpose in mind? If so, what is it? Is it part of my curriculum?

It should not be the purpose of public schools to celebrate or observe religious holidays, but rather to help students learn about them.

2. If I use holidays as an opportunity to teach about religion, am I balanced and fair in my approach?

For example, if you teach about Day of the Dead, consider also teaching about Ramadan, Diwali, or other holidays that usually occur roughly around the same time or season of the year.

3. Does the planned activity have the primary effect of advancing or inhibiting religion? Does it ask students to perform or simulate religious rites or create sacred symbols?

Remember that the school's approach should be academic, not devotional. It is never appropriate for public schools to practice or appear to practice religion.

4. Is the instruction accomplished in such a manner that information about the religious meaning of the holiday is aligned to California Content Standards and enriches student understanding of history and culture?

The History-Social Science Framework, approved by the California State Department of Education, already affords much discussion of religion in the context of the goal of cultural understanding (e.g., cultural literacy, geographic literacy, and historical literacy).

Teaching About Día de los Muertos

To avoid the appearance of sacred practice, selecting public-school appropriate resources and lesson activities is crucial. While having students create and decorate altars clearly crosses the line (an activity in many popular lessons), learning about the sacred traditions does not. Literature is a great resource, with books such as the following available from most libraries and bookstores: *Pablo*

Remembers (1993) by George Anacona; *Day of the Dead* (2008) by Carrie Gleason; *Uncle Monarch and the Day of the Dead* (2008) by Judy Goldman; *The Day of the Dead: A Mexican-American Celebration* (1995) by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith; *Day of the Dead* (2000) by Tony Johnston; *Felipa and the Day of the Dead* (2005) by Birte Muller; and *El Dia De Los Muertos: The Day of the Dead* (2002) by Mary Dodson Wade.

Visuals and video clips are another great teaching tool and often available at no cost on the Internet. Below are just a few:

Mexico's Day of the Dead Resource Page

This page from Mexconnect includes images and brief text about artifacts and celebrations of the holiday and its meaning in various regions.

Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly

This PBS program's website has many media-supported resources about religion for the classroom. The clip [Day of the Dead](#) is a behind-the-scenes look at how Latin American communities across the U.S. honor their deceased on Día de los Muertos and shows how these rituals relate to Catholic teachings.



A sugar skull (calavera). (Flickr Commons/Nathaniel Sheetz, made available under an [Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0Generic License](#).)

Smithsonian's Latino Center

Teaching resources on this page include an instructive animation and online exhibits from the Google Cultural Institute.

Wikipedia's Day of the Dead

This Wikipedia article is listed as a good resource from numerous academic sources.

Respecting and teaching about the cultures and beliefs — both religious and secular — of all peoples in our pluralistic communities is an important role of our schools. When this is done with careful consideration for the freedom of conscience of all students, not only do young scholars learn critical information about their world and its people, but schools fulfill their trust to pass along America's democratic values to the next generation as public education was designed to do.

For further information on teaching about religious holidays in a constitutional manner, see the [First Amendment Center](#) for legal guidelines and a consensus policy statement from 17 religious and educational organizations.

Please also see the First Amendment Center's [Teaching About Religion in American Life: A First Amendment Guide](#) for information specific to public schools.

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

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