

Seasons Greetings... Warmest Wishes... May the... Wishing you.... Merry...  
Happy.... Welcome to the holidays in Scarsdale!

We are all extremely fortunate to be part of a multi-national, multi-cultural, cosmopolitan Village, as it creates an incredible richness of diversity resulting in many positive outcomes for our children, as well as for the entire community. However, it can also pose some challenges. For example, the winter months may leave one a little tongue-tied about how to follow appropriate holiday etiquette, or how to respond to a holiday greeting that differs from your own practices.

Here is a small sampling of holidays celebrated in December alone:

### **Buddhism**

*Bodhi Day*: 8 December – Commemorates the Day Buddha attained enlightenment on this same day in 596 BC while sitting under the Bodhi tree

### **Christianity**

*Saint Nicholas' Day*: 6 December – Remembrance of Saint Nicholas and the importance of charity

*Feast of the Immaculate Conception Day*: 8 December – The day of the Virgin Mary's Immaculate Conception

*Las Posadas*: 16–24 December – Novenario that includes progression to various family lodgings for celebration and prayer

*Christmas Day*: 25 December – Festival celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ (also celebrated as a secular holiday)

### **Hinduism**

*Pancha Ganapati*: 21-25 December – Festival celebrated in honor of Ganesha, one of the best-known and most worshipped deities in the Hindu pantheon

### **Judaism**

*Hanukkah*: Eight-day festival of lights that occurs between November and early January, starting on the 25th day of Kislev in the lunar-based Jewish calendar.

### **Secular**

*Kwanzaa*: December 26- January 1 – Celebration that honors African heritage, culminating in a feast and gift-giving

## **Unitarian Universalism**

*Chalica*: A week-long celebration of Unitarian Universalist principles during the first week of December

Of course, the problem with creating such a list is that you are always forgetting someone's important beliefs and traditions. The above list is hardly representative of all the holidays, observances and festivals that are celebrated in December in our community, and by limiting to only this one month, we also miss out on Thanksgiving, Armistice Day, and Diwali in November, and Tu B'Shvat, New Year's Day, and Lohri in January (again, to name a few).

The pressure to get it right might lead us down the road of wanting to disengage completely from seasonal glad tidings, or as George Costanza did in a 1997 episode of "Seinfeld," do away with all convention and celebrate our own manufactured holiday, *Festivus* (for the rest of us!), as a way to escape the pressure, disenfranchisement, and commercialization that can often accompany modern holidays.

As we think about our various celebrations, both now and throughout the year, we are being asked as a District to be more deliberate in our recognition of un- or under-represented groups. Expanding the holidays in our school calendar has been one specific ask: Why not include Chinese/Lunar New Year? How about Eid ul-Adha? There are many to choose from, and we have limited capacity to extend the school year. So, how do we decide?

New York State Law provides little guidance for school districts in this area: "Education law gives school boards authority to close....their schools on a particular day of religious or cultural observance, based on a determination that keeping the schools open would result in a waste of educational resources because a considerable proportion of the student population is unlikely to attend school on that day." As you can see, the standard, as odd as it may seem, is around resource allocation, based on how many families and/or staff members are affected by the observance. This is a difficult determination to make, particularly without updated census data and a clearer understanding of how many families celebrate various traditions and holidays.

We will continue to reflect on how to increase inclusiveness and recognition of the values and beliefs represented throughout our community. Tangible results may be seen in a variety of ways. Our calendars can certainly be more reflective of holidays and festivals, even when our schools remain open. We can be even more explicit in our teaching and learning around multicultural holidays, specifically asking students what holidays they celebrate, and the beliefs, religions, and traditions that accompany them. Utilizing calendars that represent an array of important holidays can also serve as reminders for limiting homework and testing, individually or collectively, particularly around times that require religious observance. And, of course, we

can also be more mindful that our food service program aligns with dietary restrictions that accompany some holidays.

We recognize that embracing inclusivity and the diversity within Scarsdale takes a concerted effort. It requires awareness of our similarities and differences, specific and accurate knowledge of others' values and beliefs, along with the skills to individually negotiate various types of multicultural relationships. There are certainly structural changes that can support that work, and we are committed to doing that. It is important as an institution that we consistently state and model our beliefs.

It is my own theory that impactful and lasting understanding of others' lives comes from personal proximity. It is by getting to know others well that our worldview is eventually broadened. So, if you are celebrating this season, and even if you are not, consider reaching out and learning more about someone who is different from you within our community. Diversity expert Dr. Jeff Kottler says it more eloquently, "Have the courage to enter into the world of those you are trying to understand by learning their unique cultures, family histories, languages, customs, values, and priorities."

Best wishes to you and yours in the year ahead!