

PEI

JEWISH COMMUNITY RELATIONS COUNCIL OF THE JEWISH FEDERATION OF GREATER DALLAS

PUBLIC EDUCATION INITIATIVE NEWSLETTER

Serving Texas

Students by

Seeking

Historical

Accuracy

About Jews,

Judaism &

Israel in

Textbooks &

Curricula

Welcome to the Public Education Initiative, EST. 2009

By: Talia Kushnick

The Public Education Initiative (PEI) is a joint project of the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) of the Jewish Federation of Greater Dallas and the Institute for Curriculum Services: National Resource Center for Accurate Jewish Content in Schools.

PEI promotes historical accuracy about Jews, Judaism, and Israel in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills educational standards (TEKS) and the social studies textbooks that will ultimately be adopted for use in Texas classrooms. PEI achieves its goals through Jewish community outreach and Austin-based advocacy. I am based in Dallas and serve as the project's Outreach Liaison. I work with parents throughout Texas to create networks, raise awareness, and build community support for PEI goals. Pat Epstein lives in Austin and serves as our Education Liaison. She works with elected officials (including members of the State Board of Education) and education officials at the state, regional, and local levels to promote accuracy about Jews, Judaism, and Israel in educational materials. This work led to over two-dozen changes to the TEKS when they were re-written in 2009-2010 -- changes that directly impact what all children are taught in Texas classrooms and what they read in Texas textbooks.

PEI's next step is to put forth to the SBOE members the names of qualified representatives to serve on the State Textbook Review Panels. If selected, these individuals will play an integral role in the adoption of the new Texas social studies textbooks to be used in Texas classrooms K-12. Panelists evaluate the textbooks using Texas Education Agency rubrics to determine if the textbook, as written by the publishers, align with the TEKS. Panelists are assigned based on their interest and/or expertise. If you believe you have the social studies qualifications and/or an interest in participating in this important work, or know someone who might, please contact me at 214.615.5233 or tkushnick@jfgd.org.

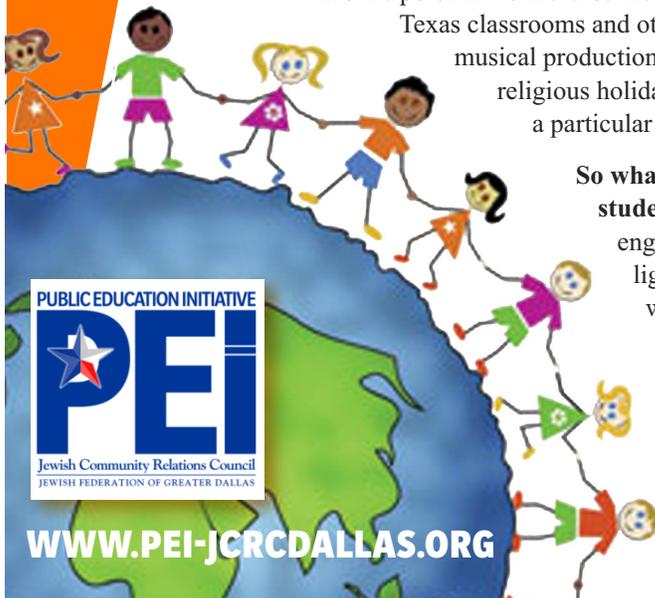
HOT TOPICS: "The Merry Christmas Bill" By: Pat Epstein

House Bill 308, sponsored by State Representative Dwayne Bohac and dubbed "The Merry Christmas Bill", was signed by Governor Rick Perry in June 2013. According to Bohac, the Bill removes any legal risks of saying "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Hanukkah" in schools, and "protects" the display of traditional holiday symbols, such as a menorah, nativity scene, or Christmas tree, as long as more than one religion and a secular symbol are also included.

Florey v. Sioux Falls School District, 49-5 (1980), long the legal standard for teaching about religion in public schools, already provided these protections. HB 308, however, has the potential to increase the inclusion of religious information in Texas classrooms and other holiday programming, such as musical productions, if it is applied as teaching "about" the religious holiday rather than teaching or advocating for a particular religion in general.

So what does HB 308 mean for Jewish students and parents? Public school engagement becomes even more critical in light of this legislation. As Jewish parents, we have the right and the responsibility to educate ourselves about the law and to participate and be involved in our children's schools. The holidays offer a unique opportunity to teach, learn, and work toward a safe and respectful place for all kids. The chart on page 2 provides ideas for addressing issues centered on holiday programming.

EDITION 1
FALL
2013



WWW.PEI-JCRCDALLAS.ORG

WHO'S WHO AT PEI

TALIA KUSHNICK

Outreach Liaison to Jewish Communities
7800 Northaven Road • Dallas, TX 75230
214.615.5233 • tkushnick@jfgd.org

PAT EPSTEIN

Education Liaison to Elected Officials &
Educational Professionals
Austin, TX
512.906.1737 (O) • 972.849.5001 (C)
pepstein@jfgd.org

ANITA ZUSMAN EDDY

Executive Director
Jewish Community Relations Council of the
Jewish Federation of Greater Dallas
7800 Northaven Road • Dallas, TX 75230
214.615.5292 • aeddy@jfgd.org

HOT TOPICS: “The Merry Christmas Bill” (Continued from page 1)

THE LAW: The legal examples below are from *Florey v. Sioux Falls School District*.

THE LAW: Religious and secular holidays may be observed in the public schools, e.g., Christmas, Easter, Passover, Halloween, Valentine’s Day, etc.; and teachers may explain the values and origins of religious holidays in an unbiased, objective manner.

What can you do?

- Talk to your teacher about what is being taught during the holidays, how it is being taught, and offer to provide accurate resources about Jewish holidays.
- Volunteer for parties centered on religious holidays. This gives you the opportunity to impact how holidays are taught and parties are structured.

THE LAW: Religious symbols such as a cross, menorah, crescent, Star of David, crèche, etc., that are a part of a religious holiday are permitted as a teaching aid or resource; however, their use must be temporary in nature.

What can you do?

- Provide accurate information, which can be found at the PEI website, about the meaning of Jewish holidays and symbols. Explain the difference between what is a religious symbol and a secular one, e.g., a dreidel versus a menorah.

THE LAW: Religious themes in music, art, literature, and drama are permitted “as part of the curriculum for school-sponsored activities and programs” but information about the holiday’s traditions and its cultural and religious heritage must be presented objectively.

What can you do?

- Talk to your children’s classroom, music, or theatre teachers to discuss their programming plans. Volunteer to help with the programs.
- Offer to help your school’s music teachers research and find diverse musical selections that reflect a variety of faiths and do not trivialize any faiths.

THE LAW: School district calendars should be developed to minimize conflicts with religious holidays of all faiths. Religious holidays are not to be counted as absences. Teachers are asked to avoid tests and pivotal assignments on or around major religious holidays.

What can you do?

- Attend meetings and/or serve on your school’s Local School Council or the district’s calendar committee. Provide your school leadership with a calendar of Jewish holidays developed by your local synagogue or JCRC.

If an incident arises, assume that it occurred because of a lack of information rather than malice.

Talk first to your teacher, and if that does not work speak to your school leadership. At all times, be respectful and educational, and remember that the Dallas JCRC and PEI are available to help.

While HB 308 may present new challenges, the opportunity exists for Jewish parents to impact how the holiday season is presented in the public schools. **The key is to be proactive and to become part of the solution rather than the problem.** Learn what is legal so your advocacy will be respected. Instead of complaining about red and green, volunteer to help plan the party. Visit with the teacher to brainstorm ideas and offer to provide resources and information. By building positive connections, you position yourself to become your teacher’s “go-to” parent when issues arise.

The Power of Public School Engagement By: Talia Kushnick

“The #1 indicator of student success is parent involvement.”¹

Driving carpool, overseeing homework, working at the school carnival, serving in the PTA, Booster Club, or on a school district committee -- it’s not how you’re involved but that you *are* involved! Research continues to show that students with parents who prioritize education, become informed stakeholders, and volunteer in some capacity achieve at higher levels and are more likely to take ownership of their own educational success.

Involved parents are also critical to thriving public schools; yet too often, they become a rarity. PEI is committed to helping parents become involved -- and to supporting those who are already. Our goal is to build statewide networks of active, involved Jewish parents who will become positioned to impact not only their own children’s education but that of all kids. To learn more, contact us at the numbers and/or emails on page 1.

¹<http://janieandrich.com/2012/02/28/student-achievement-through-parental-involvement/>

WHAT CAN PEI DO FOR YOU?

- Connect you with other public school parents to build an active, engaged, and effective Jewish parent network in your community.
- Provide information and guidance to help you become an effective advocate in your children’s schools.
- Provide resources to share with the leadership and teachers in your schools.
- Serve as your voice regarding accurate resources for Texas students at the State Board of Education and the Texas Legislature.
- Provide the educators with accurate resources and materials regarding Jews, Judaism, and Israel.
- Serve as your connection to accessing information about what is and is not legal regarding religion in public schools, and provide guidance if issues do arise.

