December 7, 2021

Dear MRUSD Community –

Last week, I issued a memo to the Maple Run staff about conducting winter celebrations within our school district. As I reflect on this communication to our staff, I recognize that it was poorly written. I didn’t give our teachers time to prepare for changes they’d have to make to their plans. For teachers who had already started to plan for holiday celebrations, my memo caused pain for them, and for their students. That was not my intention, and I am genuinely sorry.

I want to take this opportunity to explain my intent and talk about how we will be moving forward.

The holidays put extra pressure on families struggling to make ends meet. There are students who anticipate the gifts they are about to receive—known or unknown—and their behavior reflects this excitement. They can count on something good happening for them. Other students will have increased anxiety, not only due to their prior experience of not getting gifts, but the unpredictability of the holiday, and how it impacts family dynamics, housing, food, etc.

In the United States, more than 46% of all children have experienced some form of childhood trauma (abuse, neglect, food/economic/shelter insecurity, abandonment, violence, loss/grief, and other risk factors). Almost a fifth of these traumas are connected to a fall/winter holiday, and generally (adult and child) anxiety increases around holidays. Using this data, it means in a classroom of 20 children, 2 or 3 students have anxiety around the holidays. Applying these national statistics to Maple Run, this number potentially grows to approximately 270 to 400 students.

In addition, on January 20, 2020, the U.S. Department of Education released new guidance on religious topics in public schools. This included non-curricular events, decorations, and other contexts. The guidance directs school staff to not include prayer or other religious-associated content in what they compel students to participate in during class, or at school. On the other hand, schools must allow students to express themselves religiously if they choose. Maple Run must comply with all this guidance to retain our approximately 2 million dollars in Federal Grant awards.

Within our district there are many educators who have evolved their winter festivities to celebrate their community without using a holiday theme, while still teaching students about many different cultures and traditions throughout the year. Yet everyone is not at this point. Therefore, we will offer support to all educators in making this change. This week, we will be providing resources to teachers about how they can teach students about different cultures and traditions, and celebrate the joy, caring, learning, and kindness in all our communities. One
of the questions most asked of us has been: if a parent would like to express their gratitude for their child’s teacher, bus driver, and other significant adults, can they still do that? The answer is yes, **but it is not expected**. There is an attached list of suggested activities and lesson plans for teachers to celebrate wintertime in Maple Run.

Please know that Maple Run values every student and does not put one student above another. I care about the mental health of every student. Because of my actions, I may have caused hurt, which I did not intend. From my restorative practice training, I have learned that when mistakes happen, growth can come from how we repair and recover.

Sincerely,

Bill Kimball
Superintendent of Schools
Recommendations and Guidance for Winter Holidays for Maple Run Staff

To acknowledge the difficulty in making significant changes mid-year, below we are sharing ideas and resources for teaching about cultures, holidays, and traditions. Also, we have given recommendations and guidance to adapt any planned activities and celebrations to increase access for all students. These activities incorporate elements of trauma-informed instruction and connect to all members’ diverse heritage and community traditions.

Recommendations and guidance to adapt planned activities for this school year:

- **Learning activities** -
  - Cast a wide net to ensure that students have the opportunity to learn about the full range of winter holidays
  - Continue the focus on learning about diverse holiday and cultural traditions throughout the school year
  - [Learning for Justice](#) provides a range of ideas and resources that teachers can leverage in both instances.

- **Decorating** -
  - Decorations in public areas, including classrooms, should connect to the planned learning activities and celebrations. All winter holidays and traditions should be represented in an equitable manner.

- **Celebrations and traditions** -
  - Re-envision the gift exchange, which highlights and exacerbates poverty and other inequalities, to a more inclusive celebration such as those listed below.
    - **Gratitude card exchange** - students write cards expressing messages of gratitude to other students in their class. Teachers provide a mix of free choice and student assignments to ensure every child gets a card (i.e. every student is assigned two people to write cards to and then can choose 2-4 additional people of their own choice).
    - **Secret compliment notes** - similar to the above activity, students write short compliment notes to others from their class.
    - **Make a craft or a drawing for a peer in the classroom.**
  - **Outdoor winter activities “festival”** - structured time outside to engage in winter activities like sledding/hiking/hot chocolate.
  - **End of year celebration** - students celebrate the end of the calendar year by bringing 2-3 written school-related “memories” for each category (best memories, funniest memories, memories I’d like to forget, and other) to a class or team “open mic night.” The mix of refreshments, music, time to socialize, and students sharing some of their memories is fun for all.
  - **Game exchange** - students pick a name from a hat (in advance) and then teach that person how to play their favorite card or board game, or engage in another activity that brings them joy and relaxation, such as a dance party or movie afternoon.
  - **Ask your students** - share the dilemma with your students and ask them to partner with you in the creation of inclusive traditions and celebrations.
Additional reading if you are interested:

- Returning to holiday chaos: Preventing anxiety in kids - Boston Children’s Hospital
- Teaching About the Holidays in Public Schools - Edutopia
- Recognizing the Holiday Triggers of Trauma - Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
- Helping Traumatized Children Learn - Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative
- Widespread Student Trauma - Education Week
- Anxiety in Children during the Holidays - Each Mind Matters
- Gratitude is a Gateway to Positive Emotions - Psychology Today
- Gratitude Is Good: Why It’s Important And How To Cultivate It - Forbes
- Giving thanks can make you happier - Harvard Medical School
- Anti-Bias Education and Holidays - NAEYC
- US Department of Education Guidance on Religious Expression - US DOE

We would like to know the Maple Run Staff’s questions and concerns. This link will take you to an anonymous Google Form for you to submit your thoughts and questions and next week we will start to produce a Frequently Asked Questions document to further refine these resources.

Also, I know the principals will be hosting conversations during their faculty meetings this week.

Thank you for your continued commitment to all the Maple Run students.