

Snapshot

SERIES OF INFORMATIVE TEXTS ON THE CONSEIL SCOLAIRE CENTRE-NORD WRITTEN BY GLEN TAYLOR

THE HOLIDAY SEASON THROUGH THE PRISM OF DIVERSITY

Christmas is coming! It's probably not necessary to remind you — no doubt your kids are doing that every day.

Traditionally, the holiday season is one of the most anticipated times of the year. It's when people think of others, get together with family and friends, and revive the spirit of sharing and goodwill (except, perhaps, in the malls...).

It's also a Christian celebration that reflects the origins of our Albertan and Canadian society.

But this country of immigrants continues to evolve. In Alberta, the economic boom is drawing families from other parts of Canada and from all around the world. Many of them are not Christians but rather Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs or members of other religions. There are also Albertans who have no religious affiliation.

What does Christmas mean to members of the Conseil scolaire Centre-Nord community who have a different family and cultural heritage? How do people observe certain customs if they don't have the same points of reference? To find out, we visited the École publique du Nord.

A COMMUNITY SHAPED BY DIVERSITY

The families attending this school, located in the north of Edmonton, make up a highly diverse community. Now in its second year of operation, the school has nearly 80 students from kindergarten to Grade 6.



Mireille Prévost, the school principal, describes her community this way: "We have students here with different religions, languages and cultures. In many cases, the parents were born in another country but their children were born

in Canada, whether in Alberta, Quebec or elsewhere. It makes for a very diverse population.

"In order to make things run smoothly at school, we've got to take into account a variety of practices and customs. We have students who observe religious holidays that are as important as Christmas but that happen at other times of the year. So we're becoming more aware of them and planning accordingly.

"I'm learning all the time, through reading and experiences. For example, the photo reshoots last year just happened to fall on the day of a religious celebration. It was Id, which marks the end of Ramadan. Well, that day, half our students were absent! As a result, we had to reschedule the photo session for a later date."

Ramadan is a month of fasting and prayer during which Muslims commemorate revelations received by the prophet Muhammad. It ends with the holy feast of Id al-Fitr, when Muslims visit each other and exchange wishes and gifts. In a way, it's much like Christmas in many Albertan homes.

"We adapt to this reality," says Mireille, "but we also try to teach newcomers about the customs here, in their new country."

LEARNING AND ADAPTING

Each month, the school rewards students who make significant progress in their behaviour or performance. The winners are honoured at an assembly, and are invited to dinner with the principal. That, too, has been a learning experience for Mireille...

"A special meal is often pizza, but you really have to know what to order! Our Muslim students don't eat pork, so we avoid pepperoni and ham — even some treats like Rice Krispies squares, which contain gelatin, an animal product.



"However, two weeks ago, we had a community dinner at the school, which helped us learn a lot more about what people from different regions eat. It was truly a feast!

"Since our students come from a variety of backgrounds," continues Mireille, "we've adapted traditional celebrations to make them relevant for everyone. In the fall, for instance, we observe Thanksgiving by taking time to thank people around us. At Halloween, which has no real meaning for many families, we celebrate autumn. Then a little later in the season, we hold the community supper."

One of the reasons for holding these activities is to provide a chance for the children to play together and for families to get to know each other better. Outside the school, they have few such opportunities.

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

"December is all about wintertime. There are no Christmas decorations in the school and no gift exchange, but nobody seems to miss that. We prefer to let people celebrate at home."

In the same vein, the focus of Valentine's Day is on friendship, and Easter is a celebration of the spring.

"Another occasion we observe is Remembrance Day. But you know, there are families here who have experienced war in their home country. What they have lived through gives them a different perspective, one that we can scarcely imagine. So in our school, we always put the emphasis on peace."

Mireille has also learned about differences when it comes to birthdays, which are important occasions in our society but receive less attention in some religious circles. To wish students a happy birthday, Mireille gives them a decorated pencil. It's a small gesture that marks the occasion and shows that it is special in Canadian culture. At the same time, it's a way to give students an important school supply.

"By highlighting birthdays this way," says Mireille with a smile, "I'm respecting the students' customs and also introducing them to the culture that surrounds them. The kids really like it, too."

THE ROOT OF EVERYTHING: RESPECT

The school plays a vital role in children's lives, and Mireille makes sure that everything that happens is done with total respect. The teaching staff is very careful to avoid any statements that could be considered racist.

"I'm not a fan of 'tolerance' because it implies the presence of something we don't like. We can't have that kind of attitude in our school. Rather, I believe that respect should be at the root of all human relations, especially between different groups.

"After all," concludes Mireille, "there's so much we can learn from every culture!"

