

It Happened Wednesday ...

Larkspur School District Board of Trustees Meeting Highlights

At its meeting last week, the Board of Trustees adopted calendars for the school years 2008/09 and 2009/10. Each calendar designates one day off each school year to coincide with one of the Jewish holidays in the Fall, Rosh Hashana or Yom Kippur. Calendars for the 06/07 and 07/08 school years also designated days off for the same purpose. In 2006, when the day off fell on a Monday, the Board did not receive any feedback. This year, when the day fell on a Thursday, a number of concerns were raised, ranging from concern about the disruption and inconvenience caused by a day off mid-week, to a concern that the District is improperly promoting a particular religion.

A number of points of consensus were reached as a result of Board discussions:

1) We are a public school district that is fundamentally secular in nature. We do not promote any particular religion. It does not mean, however, that we ignore it. As a public school, we have an obligation and an opportunity to accommodate and celebrate the diversity of our students and families. Every member of our school community—students, parents, teachers, support staff and administrators—has an important role in this process. We teach about religion as part of our curriculum, we celebrate the richness of our various religious traditions, and we accommodate the religious needs of our students and families. For example, as part of our 7th grade curriculum, our students take field trips to churches, synagogues and mosques. Our students sing and play instruments in holiday concerts celebrating the music of Christmas and Hannukah. In doing this, we recognize that religion plays a historic and critical role in the vibrancy and diversity of our culture. We would miss an important instructional opportunity, and do our students a disservice, if we were to ignore the role of religion in our society.

2) The Board has heard extensive public comment about the calendar at the last several meetings, and they revisited many of the issues discussed in prior years. The discussion was respectful, frank, and productive. Before designating a day off in Fall 2006, the Board reviewed school attendance figures. Attendance is important for several reasons. First, a substantial portion of District funds depends on our Average Daily Attendance (ADA); the better our ADA, the more money we receive from the state. Second, when large numbers of students miss class, it can be disruptive to teaching and learning. Attendance on the Jewish holidays was lower than any days except those preceding Thanksgiving, and substantially below our average attendance of approximately 96%. This reflects the fact that a substantial percentage of District families take their children out of school to observe those holidays.

3) The Board reviewed how other school districts accommodate families whose children miss school for the Jewish holidays. Many districts establish policies dealing with scheduling of tests and class assignments. Some, such as Kentfield, also designate days off. The Board considered First Amendment issues, including observations made by

organizations dedicated to civil liberties and those affiliated with various religious denominations. A coalition of such groups advised that schools are not required to close on a particular religious holiday, but may choose to do so as a matter of administrative convenience as, for example, when large numbers of students are likely to be absent. And in no event should a student be penalized for being absent from school to observe religious holidays.

Based upon this information and input, the Board decided to continue its current policy of designating a day off school to coincide with one of the Jewish holidays. We also see the need for, and will be developing concrete policies regarding exams and homework on and following significant major holidays, to ensure that students of any religion are accommodated appropriately, even if the numbers practicing their religion do not warrant taking a day off.

We appreciate the thoughtful manner in which members of our community have approached this sensitive issue. We are confident that staff and families will recognize this as a constructive, educational opportunity for our children. Thank you for your support.