Harmony Week and the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in NSW Schools

Harmony Day was introduced in 1999 by the Australian government and coincided with the 21 March observance of the United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (IDERD). This date was chosen by the United Nations, to coincide with the commemoration of the 1960 Sharpeville massacre in South Africa. In 2019, the initiative was expanded and renamed as Harmony Week.

Harmony Week focuses on inclusiveness, respect and a sense of belonging for everyone. Following a review, in 2024, the Australian government encouraged observance of IDERD, as part of Harmony Week.

Potential benefits of celebrating Harmony Week in schools

- For many schools Harmony Week is a highlight of the school calendar, involving much goodwill and affirmation of cultural identify for students and staff through the sharing of traditional dress, food, music, dance, customs, cultural artefacts and folk stories.
- Harmony Week has the potential to encourage learning and intercultural understanding on topics such as multiculturalism, diversity, cultural identity, racism and anti-racism.
- Harmony Week may serve as an opportunity to promote the support available to assist those who are struggling with settlement issues and/or experiencing or witnessing racism.

Potential for harm during Harmony Week

- Harmony Week activities that focus solely on celebrating multiculturalism and diversity, run the risk of masking the impact that colonisation, discrimination and racism has on First Nations peoples.
- When Harmony Week activities fail to explicitly address racism and anti-racism efforts, the school community may miss an opportunity to further the cause of anti-racism. People impacted by racism may be worried that speaking up, upsets the idea of a harmonious society, despite Harmony Week's roots in the IDERD.
- When there is inconsistency between schools that encourage students to wear cultural dress and other schools that insist that only orange or school uniform can be worn, students and staff at the latter schools, may feel distressed and discriminated against.

Ideas for Harmony Week that incorporates IDERD in Schools

- Involve students and families in planning for how they would like to observe Harmony Week and IDERD at school.
- Promote the role of your school's Anti-Racism Contact Officer (or equivalent at non-NSW public schools). Harmony Week is a great time for students and families to be reminded of the school's anti-racism policy and how they can get support if they have experienced or witnessed racism.
- Create new multilingual displays and posters for the school grounds (including within visitor waiting areas) that affirm the school's celebration of diversity, its anti-racism stance and provides clear information on what to do if racism is encountered at school.
- Incorporate fact sheets, lesson plans and resources from Racism. No Way, the Australian Human Rights Commission, All Together Now, Amnesty International, All One Under the Sun and UNESCO into lessons during Harmony Week.
- Read and discuss texts such as We Are Australians (by Duncan Smith and Nicole Godwin) and I'm Australian Too (by Mem Fox). In addition, The Henry Parkes Equity Resource Library has publicly available, curated lists of anti-racism books and resources for primary school and high school.

For more information and support, contact:

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