

‘Oh, What Fun?’ School District Officials Defend ‘Jingle Bells’ Cancellation

Does the beloved Christmas carol “Jingle Bells” have a longtime connection to slavery? Cancel culture says it does, and a New York elementary school is villainizing the beloved Christmas song by dropping it from its school curriculum, as Charisma News reported last week.

Despite a public outcry as well as an academic leader’s refutation of the alleged link with slavery, district officials have made it clear that they not only agree with but defend the school’s position.

The *Rochester Beacon* reports that the Council Rock Primary School made the decision to stop using and teaching the song based in part on an article by professor Kyna Hamill, director of Boston University’s Core Curriculum.

Council Rock Principal Matt Tappon told the *Rochester Beacon* that the song had been replaced with other songs that didn’t have “the potential to be controversial or offensive.” And Brighton Central School District Superintendent Kevin McGowan posted a statement to the district’s website saying the change was not “based on a complaint, but as part of an effort to review curriculum with a diversity/equity lens.”

A Boston minstrel show first introduced “Jingle Bells,” composed by James L. Pierpont, for a public performance in 1857. Minstrelsy was then a popular form of entertainment in which white actors performed in blackface.

The song has been regularly sung at the White House for Christmas—most recently by President Barack Obama and his family upon lighting the National Christmas Tree in 2016.

When told that Council Rock had removed “Jingle Bells” based partly on her research, Hamill was stunned. Her article does not link “sleigh bells” with slave bells, although the *Rochester Beacon reports* reports that “a quick Google search shows that bells on horses were common as far back as Roman times.”

“I am actually quite shocked the school would remove the song from the repertoire,” Hamill wrote in an email to the paper. “I, in no way, recommended that it stopped being sung by children.”

“The use of bells on enslaved peoples may be true, but there is no connection to the song that I have discovered in my research,” Hamill wrote. “Perhaps finding a well-referenced source for this claim might be in order if that is what [school officials] want to determine as the cause for not singing it.

“My article tried to tell the story of the first performance of the song, I do not connect this to the popular Christmas tradition of singing the song now,” she wrote. “The very fact of [the song’s] popularity has to do [with] the very catchy melody of the song, and not to be only understood in terms of its origins in the minstrel tradition. ... I would say it should very much be sung and enjoyed, and perhaps discussed.”

But that’s not the tune taken by McGowan. The superintendent also wrote that “it may seem silly to some, but the fact that ‘Jingle Bells’ was first performed in minstrel shows where white actors performed in blackface does actually matter when it comes to questions of what we use as material in school. I’m glad that our staff paused when learning of this, reflected, and decided to use different material to accomplish the same objective in class,” per *USA Today*.

McGowan also noted the song’s close ties to Christmas. Because of that holiday’s connection to religion, he says, “Jingle

Bells” is “not likely a song that we would have wanted as part of the school curriculum in the first place. Our staff found that their simple objective could be accomplished by singing any one of many songs in class and therefore they choose to simply choose other songs.”

Brighton Central School District Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction Allison Rioux also supports the school’s decision. She wrote in an email:

“Some suggest that the use of collars on slaves with bells to send an alert that they were running away is connected to the origin of the song Jingle Bells. While we are not taking a stance to whether that is true or not, we do feel strongly that this line of thinking is not in agreement with our district beliefs to value all cultures and experiences of our students.

“For this reason, along with the idea that there are hundreds of other 5 note songs, we made the decision to not teach the song directly to all students.”

Both Rioux and Tappon declined to speak directly to the *Rochester Beacon* about the decision to nix “Jingle Bells.”
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