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More NJ school districts recognize Muslim holidays

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When the Muslim holiday Eid al-Fitr coincided on Sept. 10 this year with Rosh Hashana, a traditional school holiday in Clifton, Muslim students got an unanticipated day off to mark the end of Ramadan with their families.



DEENA YELLIN/STAFF

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Saima Waheed of Teaneck, with son Esahm, 4, says Muslim holidays 'should be universally accepted.'

But some parents and local groups protested what they mistakenly thought was a new day off for a Muslim holiday and questioned why the same courtesy wasn't extended for Columbus Day, on which many school districts close. The misperception set off a firestorm for the district that hasn't been entirely tamed.

The incident highlights the fact that more New Jersey school districts are reconsidering their holiday calendars in light of a booming Muslim population. Clifton isn't one of them, even

though officials report a 20 percent absenteeism rate on Muslim holidays.

"We have 67 different languages spoken in Clifton homes and we have many different ethnic groups," said James Daly, president of Clifton's Board of Education. The idea of giving off for Muslim holidays has never been raised, he said. "Once you start making accommodations for one group, where do you draw the line?"

Yet, many New Jersey districts have for years closed schools for Muslim holidays, including Paterson, Atlantic City, Trenton, Cliffside Park, Piscataway, Prospect Park, Plainfield and Irvington. South Brunswick schools, with a Muslim student population of 20 percent, added the religion's holidays to its calendar this year for the first time.

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Hala Fahmy is a teacher's aide at School 1 in Prospect Park, one of many districts in New Jersey that close for Muslim holidays.

"We looked at the diversity of the community and felt it was the right thing to do," said Matthew Speesler, South Brunswick school board president.

Teaneck will consider many requests from the community to give the days off because of its considerable Muslim population, the district said.

Federal and state law protects students who miss school for religious observances, such as Good Friday, Yom Kippur, and the Hindu holiday Ganesha Chaturthi by considering them excused absences. The list of excused religious holidays published

by the state Department of Education has swelled to 134, encompassing about a dozen religions — including the Wicca observance of Lammass. The list also includes Eid al-Fitr, which this year fell on Sept. 10, and Eid al-Adha, the Muslim feast of sacrifice, observed this year on Nov. 16.

Amid changing demographics, experts say more schools are giving all students the day off for those holidays, although there are no statistics that track the number.

New Jersey is home to about a half-million Muslims, and 100 mosques, according to the Council on American Islamic Relations. According to the Pew Research Center, the Muslims population in the U.S. is 2,454,000. Muslim groups give higher estimates.

"As the population becomes more diverse, we are seeing that there is more recognition that students will take off those days from school," said Frank Belluscio of the New Jersey School Boards Association. "The school boards look at the number of students and faculty who will be absent those days and make a determination of whether to give those days,"

Unprompted by parents, Prospect Park schools began closing for the two major Muslim holidays five years ago, a gesture for which "the Muslim students were very appreciative," said Superintendent James Barriale. It eased frustration for the students and teachers who ordinarily would miss instruction to take days off for the holiday, he said.

In Clifton, some residents still are steaming that Columbus Day is not observed in the school calendar.

"We have to start concentrating more on our American holidays," said David D'Arco, president of the Passaic/Clifton chapter of UNICO, an Italian-American organization. "If religious holidays have to take a hit, then so be it. We're losing our national identity."

D'Arco strongly advocates for Columbus Day as a school holiday, arguing that all Americans, including immigrants, should celebrate the explorer popularly credited with discovering America.

Dawn Tarpey of Clifton, like many parents, said she was under the impression that Columbus Day had been sacrificed by the Clifton school district to make way for Eid al-Fitr. The district hasn't closed schools for Columbus Day for several decades, according to officials.

"All the holidays that have been around for centuries that I had off when I was a child are being lost, and all these other nationalities are getting off in place of our holidays," she said this week. "We now have Ramadan, Martin Luther King Day and Rosh Hashana, but there's no holidays in there for us. The whites are the minority and our race is being wiped away by all these other races and their religions."

Like D'Arco, she said she feels American culture has been pushed aside.

But the impetus to persuade more districts to close schools on Muslim holidays seems just as strong. Advocates urge parents throughout North Jersey to pressure school districts to recognize their holidays so that students don't have to take time from school in order to observe their religions.

Madiha Kato, a math teacher at Passaic County Tech in Wayne, says although her school has a large number of Muslim students and teachers, the administration has not given them recognition by acknowledging their holidays. "I have to take off the holidays as sick days or vacation days," she said. "When the Muslim holiday comes, a lot of students and teachers miss that day."

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