

Muslims press schools on getting holidays off: Conflict over Eid holidays

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Calculus and chemistry are among the pressures awaiting Mesuka Akter, a senior at Long Island City High School in New York City. But unlike in past school years, this year Akter, a Muslim, will not have to choose between missing school and missing the two holiest days on the Islamic calendar.

Provided an early or late moon does not change the Islamic lunar calendar, Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of Ramadan, is expected to take place September 20, a Sunday. Eid al-Adha, or the Feast of Sacrifice, is expected to come on Thanksgiving Day or the Friday after.

“It feels great to know that I’ll be home, hopefully, with my family,” said Akter, who has two younger brothers. “But you also have to keep working to change things, because this will be a problem again next year.”

Akter belongs to the Coalition for Muslim School Holidays, a group of more than 80 religious and ethnic organizations lobbying to have the two Eid holidays designated as days off in New York City schools, in which 10 percent of the 1.1 million students are Muslim, according to a study published last year by the Teachers College at Columbia University. The city’s school calendar already recognizes Christmas and the Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Religious-holiday controversies are not unique to Muslims or to New York City. The issue can loom as large as church-state donnybrooks or can be as quotidian as students’ desire to achieve perfect school attendance while also observing their faith.

Adherents of non-Abrahamic religions also face difficult choices but do not have the numbers to ask for school holidays. Ishani Chowdhury remembers how her parents

wrote notes to teachers asking them to excuse their daughter on Diwali, a major Hindu holiday usually celebrated in the fall.

“We think you can discuss these issues with teachers. You can take a proactive approach. You can observe your faith and still work toward your educational goals,” said Chowdhury, who is director of public policy at the Hindu American Foundation.

The New York effort took off after state education officials scheduled the Regents exam on Eid al-Adha in 2006. In 2007, the New York state legislature passed a law prohibiting the scheduling of standardized tests on religious holidays and is considering a bill that would require New York City schools to close on the two Eid days.

The New York City Council recently passed a nonbinding resolution in favor of closing school for the Eid holidays. But Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who has the final say, opposes the idea, arguing that it would cut into the 180 days of school required by state law and open the door to adherents of more religions asking for their holidays off.

Others agree that shortening the school year would be a mistake, but say city officials can simply shorten summer vacation instead.

Students are not the only ones affected when school is in session on religious holidays; school workers are as well. Supporters of closing public schools for Eid note that before the decision was made to close schools on Jewish holidays, about 20 percent of students and 40 percent of school workers were Jewish.

Samira Hussein, who has pushed to have Eid designated as a school holiday in Montgomery County, Maryland, noted that while the number of Muslim school workers in the county has increased, concerns about a perceived negative public image of Muslims sometimes keeps them from asking off for the Eid days.

“We have more Muslim teachers now than in the past, but they’re not coming forward,” said Hussein, a social worker in the county school system. “A lot of them are new teachers and worry that the debate is too controversial.” *-Religion News Service*