

Interest in Islam takes Ramadan into class: Sometimes controversial

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Before mid-November arrives, multicultural educator Afeefa Syeed will have brought third-, fourth- and fifth-grade students from the Muslim Al Fatih Academy in Herndon, Virginia, to several public schools to share the practices and beliefs of their holiest month, Ramadan.

Syeed and the children will present the call to prayer in Arabic, display prayer rugs and offer tastes of dates. In countless other classrooms across the country, similar efforts will be made to educate students about the time of fasting and spiritual reflection for adherents of the world's second-largest religion.

Ramadan, which began in mid-October this year, is making more appearances in public school classrooms, thanks to a series of new teacher training initiatives, an increased fascination with Islam and the assurance that schools, if careful, can educate impressionable children about religion without crossing a constitutional line.

The Council on Islamic Education, a nonprofit organization based in Fountain Valley, California, plans to release an updated version of its booklet *Muslim Holidays*, which was first published in 1997, for the more than 4,000 teachers nationwide who have used it.

The booklet, which contains lesson plan ideas and historical and cultural background on Ramadan and other Muslim holidays, also outlines the various state regulations governing instruction about religion in public schools and discusses accommodations that schools can make to enable Muslim students to observe the holiday.

Muslim educators note tremendous progress in education about Ramadan and Islam in general in public schools, particularly since the terrorist attacks of September 2001—perpetrated by extremist Muslims— brought Islam into the national spotlight.

Another reason for this success, some say, is an increased awareness in public education circles of what is constitutionally appropriate to teach about religion.

In 1995, President Clinton released *Religious Expression in Public Schools: A Statement of Principles*— guidelines on promoting the free exercise of religion in schools without endorsing a particular faith. The First Amendment Center in Arlington, Virginia, subsequently launched a series of training initiatives to remind public school officials nationwide of the federal and state regulations concerning religion in schools.

Unlike the political situation, which has become divisive in some ways, “the educational arena came out unscathed” by increased attention on Islam since September 11, said Shabbir Mansuri, founding director of the Council on Islamic Education. Whereas Ramadan used to garner only cursory attention from public school teachers, Muslim education consultants say, interest in a deeper understanding of the holiday has spiked.

“They want to know accurate information,” said Sharifa Alkhateeb, president of the Washington-based Muslim Education Council. Alkhateeb, who has worked with administrators, teachers and textbook publishers since 1989, says that an increase in the number of Muslim students in public schools is part of the reason for the heightened attention.

“They want to know how it impacts the lives of the students on a daily basis with their other school work,” she said. The number of Muslim public school students in Virginia’s Fairfax County, a Washington suburb, has tripled to more than 6 percent in the past 15 years, said Alkhateeb, who works closely with school officials there.

For teachers and administrators, as well as fellow students, explaining Ramadan helps the school accommodate the religious requirements of the holiday. For example, at puberty, children begin to participate in the daily fast, which lasts from sunrise to sundown each day of the month. Many schools arrange for Muslim students to sit in the library during lunchtime so that they are not surrounded by food as they fast.

Also, Muslim students are often excused from physical education during the month, as fasting students may become exhausted by rigorous physical activity.

But teaching Ramadan in public schools has not been without controversy. Last year a federal judge said that the Byron Union school district in California could continue a three-week curriculum that emphasized role-playing exercises requiring, among other things, seventh-grade students to recite Muslim prayers. Despite the ruling in

the district's favor, the school suspended the program because of the outcry the lawsuit spawned.

Crucial to avoiding these kinds of problems, say educators, is understanding the difference between "teaching" and "teaching about" religion. -*Holly Lebowitz Rossi, Religion News Service*