



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on November 12, 2014

## School District Removes Religious Holidays From School Calendars

A Maryland school district has bowed under pressure by Muslim community leaders, electing to remove all references to religious holidays from school calendars. But despite the intention to appease Muslim leaders, most of them believe the decision indicates insensitivity to the Muslim community.

The Montgomery County school board voted seven to one on November 11 to eliminate all references to religious holidays beginning with school calendar year 2015-2016.

Holidays to be removed include Christmas, Easter, Yom Kippur, and Rosh Hashanah.



Fox News reports, “The vote came after a recommendation by schools Superintendent Joshua Starr that the board consider removing the names of religious holidays from the calendar in response to a request from Muslim community leaders to give equal billing to their holy day of Eid al-Adha.”

As noted by the *Washington Post*, the fight was not actually for students to be granted the day off from school on Eid al-Adha next year, but rather for the school district to explicitly recognize the Muslim holiday as equally important to other holidays, particularly Yom Kippur. *The Post* writes, “Muslim leaders had focused their efforts for the next school year on having the holiday of Eid al-Adha [recognized with equal prominence on the published school calendar](#) because the holiday falls on the same day as Yom Kippur, when Montgomery schools are already closed.”

In 2015, both Eid al-Adha and Yom Kippur fall on September 23, but the school calendar lists only Yom Kippur on the date, with a parenthetical note that indicates “Eid al-Adha also falls on this date.” For Muslims, the note does not hold the same meaning as listing Eid al-Adha directly beside Yom Kippur on that date.

“We need to see equal treatment,” Muslim leader Saqib Ali told the board. “Here is a case where, on a piece of paper — this is strictly a symbolic issue — but on this day when schools are closed, even on this day, the Jewish holidays are given sort of precedence or elevated.”

Starr explained that the primary reason schools are closed on Christian and Jewish holidays was because of the abundance of student absences on those days, not because of religious observance. State law provides for school holidays to include Christmas and Easter. Montgomery began closing schools in recognition of Jewish holidays in the 1970s.

Muslim community leaders had hoped that if they could urge enough families to keep students home on Eid al-Adha, the school board would close schools on that day as well. But as reported by the *Washington Post*, the number of absences amounted to only slightly more than what is expected on a typical school day.

According to district figures, 5.6 percent of students and five percent of teachers were not in school on



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Eid al-Adha this year, which fell on Oct. 15. By comparison, on October 14, a normal school day, 3.2 percent of students and 4.2 percent of teachers were absent. “There is a slight increase that day, but it’s not out of the normal range of what we would see on a Tuesday,” said Montgomery schools spokesman Dana Tofig.

Muslim leaders bemoan that the district has not set a standard for the level of absenteeism needed for granting a school closing on a Muslim holiday. Board member Christopher Barclay agrees that a standard should be set for that purpose. “It must be clear to any community: Here’s the number,” he said. “I think that’s the only way you’re going to be fair and clear to everyone.”

While the district excuses the absences of students who miss school on religious holidays, Muslim families state that they should not have to decide between recognizing their faith or schoolwork. The leaders insist that the principle of the matter is equality. Muslim protesters appeared at the school board meeting bearing signs that read “Because our children matter too.”

Several options were presented to the board by Superintendent Starr, including removing both Muslim and Jewish holidays on the calendar. The board then elected to remove Christian holidays as well, citing the Fairfax County school system in Virginia as an example. Fairfax County is the largest school district in Virginia and does not refer to any religious holidays by name.

The *Washington Post* elaborates on the board’s decision:

In voting to scrub the holiday names from the calendar, board members said they were trying to reflect the reason schools are closed on religious holidays: because of operational impacts — such as expected high absenteeism among students and staff on those days — not because the school system is observing a religious occasion.

The new school calendars will replace “Christmas vacation” with “Winter break” and “Easter vacation” with “Spring break.” And single days that have been earmarked for Jewish holidays like Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah will simply read “No School.”

“This seems the most equitable option,” said board member Rebecca Smondrowski (District 2), who offered the amendment. The only person who voted against the move was board member Michael Durso, who asserts that the move comes off as “insensitive” to Muslims in the community.

And though the school board’s vote was intended to appease the protesters, the Muslim leaders are displeased with the result. “By stripping the names Christmas, Easter, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, they have alienated other communities now, and we are no closer to equality,” Saqib Ali, a former Maryland state delegate and co-chair of the Equality for Eid Coalition, told the *Post*. “It’s a pretty drastic step, and they did it without any public notification.”

Similarly, Zainab Chaudry, another co-chair of the Equality for Eid Coalition, expressed discontent at the decision, stating that the board members were willing to “go so far as to paint themselves as the Grinch who stole Christmas” to avoid granting equal treatment for the Muslim holiday. “They would remove the Christian holidays and they would remove the Jewish holidays from the calendar before they would consider adding the Muslim holiday to the calendar,” she said.

Leaders in the coalition believe that their request for equal billing for a Muslim holiday is a “minimal” one. “If MCPS can’t list the holidays equally, if they won’t even grant that, then I think people are going to start asking questions about MCPS’s general attitude toward the Muslim community,” he said.



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