



An Educator's Guide to Islamic Religious Practices



Demographers say that Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the United States and around the world. American Muslims are found in all sectors of society. This presence is perhaps most evident in the public school system, where Muslim students of various racial and ethnic backgrounds make up an increasing percentage of the school population. Recent studies show that most Muslim children are enrolled in public schools. This growing demographic segment adds a new dimension to be considered as educators work with issues of diversity.



Across faith communities, religious practices have many similarities, although the details of time and procedure may differ from one religion to another. The information contained in this booklet is designed to assist teachers, principals, administrators and other educators in formulating and implementing policies and programs that will help to create a culturally sensitive and supportive academic environment. It will also serve as a guide for the accommodation of religiously-mandated practices of Muslim students and their families. The information in this guide outlines general Islamic beliefs and practices. Individual applications of these observances may vary.

Glossary of Muslim Terms

Eid (EED): A day of festivity, major religious holiday.

Halal (Hah-LAAL): Permissible by Islamic law.

Hij'ab (Hee-JAAB): Clothing Muslim women wear in public. It is generally loose-fitting and includes a head covering.

Jum 'ah (JOO-mah): Friday congregational prayer, the Muslim weekly worship service.

Kufi (KOO-fee): A cap sometimes worn by Muslim men.

Qur'an (QUR-aan): Islam's scripture, sometimes spelled Koran.

Ramadan (RAHM-a-daan): The month of fasting.



U. S. Legal Protections of Religious Rights

Prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, religious celebrations, and dietary and clothing requirements are practices of the Muslim faith. They are considered bona fide religious beliefs, and those who practice them regard them as compulsory religious duties. These are protected by provisions in the Bill of Rights and in federal law:

- The First Amendment to the Constitution protects the free exercise of religion and prevents government from establishing a state religion.
- Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, and national origin in programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance. Schools that are recipients of federal funds must generally follow federal anti-discrimination policies or risk the loss of federal funds.
- The Equal Access Act of 1984 (upheld by the Supreme Court in 1990) affirms the right of student-initiated religious clubs to campus media and other resources if the school receives federal funds and permits other student non-curricular clubs to the same access and resources.

Although TITLE VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 does not directly cover religion, religious-based harassment of muslim students is often based on shared ancestry of ethnic characteristics, which is covered.

Many state laws contain provisions that protect religious rights from government infringement. In particular, many include important legal protections that require schools to take action against bullying and harassment of students that is based on race, color, national origin, sex, or disability.

- The New York State Dignity for All Students Act (or “DASA”) states that no student shall be subjected to harassment or bullying by employees or students on school property or at a school function.
- DASA also provides that no student shall be subjected to discrimination based on a person's actual or perceived: race, color, weight, national origin, ethnic group, religion, religious practice, disability, sexual orientation, gender (including gender identity or expression), or sex by school employees or students on school property or at a school function
- To comply with DASA, at least one staff member in each school must be designated as the Dignity Act Coordinator (“DAC”) and be thoroughly trained to handle human relations in the areas of race, color, weight, national origin, ethnic group, religion, religious practice, disability, sexual orientation, gender (defined to include gender identity or expression), and sex.
- New York City’s anti-bullying program is called Respect For All. It ensures that NYC schools maintain “a safe and supportive learning environment that is free from harassment, intimidation and/or bullying and from discrimination.” Every school has a Respect For All Liaison that can be contacted in regards to bullying.

Dietary Requirements

The Qur'an (Islam's scripture) prohibits consumption of alcohol, pork, and any pork by-products or derivatives. Therefore, many Muslims are careful about the food they consume and how it is prepared. Muslims follow certain standards—called Halal (permissible by Islamic law)—in slaughter and preparation of meat and poultry. Some objectionable food items include:

- Pepperoni, sausage, and hot dogs containing pork
- Bacon – alone or in soups, quiche, etc.
- Animal shortening—in breads, puddings, cookies, cakes, donuts, etc. Vegetable shortening is acceptable
- Gelatin – in Jello, desserts, candies, marshmallows, chocolates, etc.
- Lard – in any product
- Food ingredients containing alcohol, such as vanilla extract and Dijon mustard

School lunch items containing ingredients derived from pork must be highlighted clearly, especially in elementary schools. For preschool and elementary food programs, many school cafeterias have been particularly helpful to Muslim parents and students by labeling such foods with a prominent visual marker, such as a red dot or a picture of a pig, for beginning readers. Most schools provide non-meat options or other alternatives to objectionable food items. Where parents are allowed to bring snacks or treats to the classroom, it is important to notify them that Muslim students may not be able to consume certain food items and to plan accordingly.





Expressions of Personal Modesty

Islam prescribes that both men and women behave and dress modestly. Muslims believe that an emphasis on modesty encourages society to value individuals for their wisdom, skills, and contribution to the community, rather than for physical attractiveness. There are a number of ways in which Muslims express such teachings.

Men and young boys may choose to wear clothing that covers them from the navel to the knee. Also, some male Muslim students wear a small head covering, called a kufi. Many older boys choose to grow beards for religious reasons as well.

When in public, Muslim women often wear loose-fitting, non-revealing clothing, known as hijab. This attire, which may vary in style, usually includes covering the hair, neck, and body. Some Muslim women may wear a face veil, commonly referred to as niqab.

Schools may have uniform requirements and “no-hat” policies, as well as dress codes that mandate certain standards of appearance for students. However, schools should provide appropriate modifications to their policies for religiously-mandated clothing such as head scarves and skullcaps.

The wearing of a head covering may lead to teasing by other students. Teachers should prevent classmates from pulling on or removing a Muslim student’s scarf. Such an action is a serious act of bullying and harassment that must be addressed by school staff and administration.

Adolescence and Gender Relations

Puberty is a major turning point in the life of a Muslim. For those who have reached puberty, Islam prescribes certain parameters for relations between persons of differing gender. For example, many Muslims are reluctant to shake hands with persons of different genders, even with teachers or administrators. This should not be taken as an insult, but as a sign of personal modesty.

Physical Education

Muslim boys and girls may not wish to take same-gender communal after-sport showers without wearing appropriate covering of their bodies. Private showers should be made available, or gym classes could be scheduled in a later period, allowing the student to shower at home.

School administrators may discuss alternative clothing in physical education classes with required uniform or clothing changes with students and parents. Alternatives could include knee-length shorts for boys and full track suits for girls.

Muslim students should not be forced to participate in co-ed swimming classes. Schools that require swimming skills have offered outside certification as an option or permitted Muslim students to swim in religiously appropriate clothing, such as a burkini or layered swim clothing.

A burkini is a type of swimming suit for women which covers the whole body except for face, hands, and feet, while being light enough for swimming.

Also, Muslims may raise religious objections to co-ed physical education classes and to school-sponsored dances. In particular, activities where students of different genders are required to physically touch or come into contact with one another may be objectionable to Muslim students and families. No student should be pressured to participate or penalized for not taking part in such activities. Where possible, students should be provided with appropriate accommodations or with an alternate activity.



Muslim Holidays

Islamic holy days and festivals follow the lunar calendar. Like the solar calendar, the lunar calendar has twelve months. However, a lunar month, marked by the appearance of a new crescent moon in the horizon, may last only 29 days. A lunar year is about eleven days shorter than the solar year. This means that Islamic festivals occur about eleven days earlier each year, and that the dates for significant holidays will change with the school calendar.

There are several days in the Muslim calendar with special religious significance, but the major celebrations common to all Muslims are the two Eid (holiday) days. The first Eid day is celebrated on the day after the month of Ramadan (the month of fasting) and is called Eid al-Fitr. The second is celebrated on the tenth day of the twelfth Islamic month and is called Eid al-Adha. The festivities include congregational prayer, gatherings with family and friends, and gifts and entertainment, especially for children. A typical greeting on these occasions is “Eid Mubarak,” or “Blessed Eid.”

Pronunciation Guide:

Eid al-Fitr: EED ull-FITTr

Eid al-Adha: EED ull-AHD-ha

Eid Mubarak: EED moo-BAR-ak

Celebrating Eid requires that Muslims take at least one day off from school. There should be no penalty for this religious obligation. Because the occurrence of Eid depends on the sighting of the new moon, the exact date cannot be determined with certainty until a few days before the holiday. Most Muslim students and families do their best to notify their teachers and administrators as far in advance of the holiday as possible.

Muslim communities around the country would like to see that Eid receives recognition similar to that given to Christmas and Hanukkah, especially in schools where Muslims constitute a significant segment of the student population. Where the number of Muslim students is low, schools can demonstrate

On March 4, 2015, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio and Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña announced that New York City will become the largest school district in the nation to recognize Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha as holidays on the official school calendar. Many other school districts outside of NYC have also recognized these holidays on the school calendar.

commitment to diversity by refraining from marking students absent when they do not attend school on Eid. Also, major events (games, exams, plays, etc.) should be scheduled around these holidays.

New York law requires that children be excused on religious holy days provided a parent or guardian request the excused absence.

Fasting

The month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, is the time when Muslims are required to fast. Fasting during Ramadan is one of the five “pillars” of Islam. (The other pillars include a declaration of faith, daily prayer, offering regular charity, and pilgrimage to Mecca.) Observing the Ramadan fast means refraining from eating and drinking from break of dawn to sunset. The dates of this fast change each year, so the fast will eventually rotate throughout the full solar year.

Ramadan is a period of self-restraint and a time to focus on moral conduct. It is also a time to empathize with those who are less fortunate and appreciate what one has. Fasting does not, however, mean that Muslims cease to work.



Fasting is prescribed when children reach the age of puberty. Many Muslim families allow their young children to experiment with fasting throughout all or part of the day. Fasting students should be allowed to go to the school library or another safe space instead of the cafeteria during lunch. Also, they should be excused from strenuous physical activity during the fast, particularly when Ramadan falls during hot summer months. Teachers should monitor their students closely to ensure that Muslim students do not become dehydrated during hot weather.

To turn the diversity in the classroom to educational advantage, many schools invite Muslim students or guest speakers to explain the practices and traditions surrounding the Ramadan fast. This will help Muslim students avoid a feeling of awkwardness about not having lunch with his or her fellow students during the month. By providing opportunities for students of varied religious backgrounds to share their special occasions, the school helps to support parents and communities in their efforts to teach beneficial values. Such information is also important preparation for students as future citizens.

Curriculum Issues

Many Muslims feel their faith has been treated with bias in textbooks and school programs. Although availability of more accurate and balanced instructional material is increasing, the continued use of outdated material in social studies and world history classes reinforces perceptions of Islam as a foreign creed and Muslims as enemies. Such divisiveness has contributed to incidents of harassment and violence against Muslim children by their schoolmates.

In a number of cases, Muslim children have been mocked as “devil worshippers,” “sand n--gers,” “towel heads,” or “camel jockeys.” Others are called “terrorists” or are taunted with references to violent extremists such as ISIS. Young Muslim women are often particularly vulnerable and have been subjected to physical assault or forceful removal of their headscarves.



School boards may want to review policies and programs in light of the increasing Muslim population in the public school system. Textbooks that contribute to religious prejudice are not suitable for educating students. Books that lack reliable information are usually replete with mistakes about the basic Islamic

beliefs. One common error is the definition of “Allah” as a particular Muslim god rather than the same God of Christianity and Judaism. Qualified Muslim educators should participate in the textbook selection process, particularly for history, social studies, and geography texts.

Family Life/Sex Education

Family life and sex education material presented in schools is another sensitive matter to many Muslim families. In Islam, individuals become religiously responsible for their deeds when they reach puberty. Islam puts great emphasis on modesty, chastity and morality, and there is a specific set of teachings with regard to human development and its related issues.

The curriculum for health and sex education should be shared with students and parents in advance. Parents should be informed that they may opt-out their children from certain non-required portions of the instruction.

The NYS Regulations of the Commissioner Title 8, Chapter 2, Section 135.3 reads, in part: "No pupil shall be required to receive instruction concerning the methods of prevention of AIDS if the parent or legal guardian of such pupil has filed with the principal of the school...a written request that the pupil not participate in such instruction, with an assurance that the pupil will receive such instruction at home."

Religious Teachings and Proselytizing

School curricula may include information on the history of religions, but it is prohibited for schools to teach a sectarian or religious doctrine. It is not appropriate for school resources to be used for proselytizing or distributing religious materials that are not part of a religiously neutral curriculum. Schools should also not allow third parties to intrude on the educational environment to proselytize or lead prayers during instructional programming or other school-sponsored events.

Pledge of Allegiance

Islam discourages acts of reverence to anyone or anything but God. Some Muslims may be hesitant to recite the pledge of allegiance. This, however, should not be taken as a sign of disrespect to the symbol of the nation. Many Muslim parents teach their children to stand up but not to recite the pledge. Federal and state laws prohibit public schools from forcing students to recite the pledge or penalizing them for refusing to do so.



Daily Prayer

Islam urges “God consciousness” in the individual’s life. To that end, Islam prescribes that believers perform prayer five times each day. Two such times, a few minutes after meridian of the sun and approximately two hours after that, may fall within regular school hours. It usually takes less than 15 minutes to accomplish the religious requirements of the prayer. NYS law permits students or faculty to perform voluntary prayer if they wish to do so.

NYS Commissioner’s Regulations § 109.2(a) allows an absence from school for religious observance and education: “Absence of a pupil from school during school hours for religious observance and education to be had outside the school building and grounds will be excused upon the request in writing signed by the parent or guardian of the pupil.”

Washing

Before each prayer, Muslims are required to wash their faces, hands and feet with clean water. This washing is normally performed in a restroom sink or other facility that has running water, and takes about two minutes.

Prayer Space and Time

During the act of worship, which includes specific recitations from the Qur’an, the Muslim will stand, bow and touch the forehead to the ground. Worship may be performed in any quiet, clean room. During the prayer, the worshiper will face



toward Mecca (generally northeast in America). Total privacy is not required. However, others should not walk in front of or interrupt the worshipper during the prayer.

During prayer, the Muslim is fully engaged. He or she may not respond to a conversation. Students and teachers should not take offense if the worshipper does not answer their call during the prayer. However, in case of an emergency, the Muslim will respond to an announcement by stopping the prayer immediately.

Organizing Prayers Through Extracurricular Clubs

Teachers need not be involved in any way in student-initiated prayers. Muslim students, like their counterparts from other faiths, can establish extracurricular clubs to organize prayer activities. Equal access policies require that if other student religious clubs are allowed to use school resources such as a PA system, then Muslim student clubs must be allowed access to those same resources.

Friday Congregational Prayer

In Islam, Friday is the day for congregational worship, called *Jum'ah*. It is an obligation that must be fulfilled. *Jum'ah* lasts about one hour and takes place at the mosque during midday prayer. The service is similar to a Sunday church service, with a *khutbah*, or sermon, from the spiritual leader. Those who are conscientious about attending this prayer may request a temporary release from school or an extended lunch period. In high schools and universities where the number of students interested in performing the prayer is large, the function can be conducted by students on the school premises.

Religious Accommodation Suggestions



Pork and Pork By-products in Lunches

- Mark items with a red dot or a picture of a pig.
- Provide alternate lunch options, such as vegetarian meals and snacks.

Muslim Holidays

- Schedule exams and other major events around holidays.
- Do not mark students absent, or note that their absence is excused for a religious holiday.

Ramadan Fast

- Allow students to study in the library or elsewhere during lunch.
- Monitor students for overheating or dehydration in excessively hot weather.



Physical Education

- Discuss clothing requirements with Muslim parents.
- Reschedule classes for students preferring same gender exercise environment.
- Provide students with alternate activities if they cannot participate.



Gender Relations

- Do not extend hand first for handshake with members of different genders.
- Avoid touching when comforting students and parents of different genders.
- Respect students' boundaries and allow them to choose whether they wish to hug or hold hands with members of different genders.

Family Life/Sex Education Program

- Allow parents reasonable time to review any material dealing with sex education.
- Allow children to opt-out from all or part of the sex education program.



Prayer

- Allow Muslim students to pray in unused rooms.
- Provide them with privacy and space, as well as a clean place to perform ritual washing.

Fairness in Classroom and Text Presentations

- Check textbooks and curricula for religious bias.
- Invite Muslim speakers to social studies and world religion classes.
- Encourage class discussion that embraces diversity, tolerance, and an inclusive classroom environment.





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