

A MOVEMENT BEGINNING WITH

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A group of four students petitioned to have Muslim holidays such as Eid-al-Adha and Eid-al-Fitr as days where the ICCSD would not be in session.

As the snow was falling and families were gathering to decorate trees and wrap presents, an elementary student sat down and wrote a letter. With the encouragement of her mother, the little girl typed up her thoughts and sent them to Superintendent Stephen Murley. From there, the email would be forwarded to school board member Ruthina Malone, and other students, including fifth grader Reem Kipja, sixth-grader Noor Saad and seventh-grader Lana Ahmed, would join her on her quest.

These girls would later go on to stand in front of the Iowa City School Board with their parents, teachers and fellow classmates in hopes of accomplishing the letter's request. Sixth-grader Rayan Saeid requested for school to no longer be in session on Muslim holidays.

"I wrote that it was unfair that we didn't have Eid off and that we should have it off," Saeid said.

Islam celebrates two major holidays. The first holiday, Eid-al-Adha, honors the willingness of Ibrahim to sacrifice his son Ishmael as an act of obedience to Allah. The second, Eid-al-Fitr, marks the end of Ramadan, the Islamic holy month of fasting.

Those who celebrate the holidays spend them with family, wear nice clothing, receive money and pray the prayer of Eid. For many students, this means being absent from class.

"[Teachers] don't usually [shorten] lessons ... considering that a lot of the school is Muslim," said Maria Osman '19. "So I would have to re-read everything and teach myself all the things ... That would usually reflect badly on tests later on. They force you to choose between school and a religious holiday."

Even at the elementary level, these absences can have a great impact on the education of the students.

"I missed a test and I had to do it while everyone was at recess ... I [was] really scared to ask the teacher about a question that I [didn't] understand because I [felt] like she [was] going to judge me or be annoyed," Saeid said.

Just like Saeid, other students may feel anxious about talking to a teacher. Some also believe that celebrating the holiday is not worth the pressure faced from missing class.

"We don't want to miss Eid, [but] we don't want to miss school," Saad said.

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-LANA AHMED '23

In their speech in front of the school board on Feb. 13, the girls talked about the lack of knowledge people have about their religion and its holidays. According to the Pew Research Center, there are an estimated 1.8 billion Muslims

worldwide, making Islam the world's second largest religion after Christianity.

Despite this, these students still feel there is a lack of knowledge in the community about their faith and hope having one day off for each of the holidays would counteract that.

"I would be proud to talk about it all day; I [could] tell a million people. When people ask me what Eid [is], I tell them with pride and happiness. I'm really, really proud to be a Muslim," Ahmed said.

In the girls' letter and speech, they also addressed the inequality they felt with not having those holidays off.

"Around Halloween at school, [the students] get to have this whole parade with costumes, and even if [the school district] doesn't give us a party at school, they don't even give us a holiday [off]," Kipja said.

With the invitation from Malone and the help from family friends and city council president Mazahir Salih, the girls were able to present a speech to a full house. And though many did raise their hands in support of having Muslim holidays off, the school board has yet to decide on the outcome.

According to Murley, "At this time, the district is seeking input from the religious leaders in Iowa City about the issue of how best to handle religious holidays that fall on school days."

If decisions are made to have Muslim holidays off according to the ICCSD calendar, students would not experience the effects until the spring of 2020, because Islam follows the lunar calendar. This means that for the next two years, Eid-al-Adha and Eid-al-Fitr will take place during the summer while school is not in session.

A local movement began with a girl and a letter, and even though Saeid has now moved out of the district, she knows her friends will continue what she started. She still hopes Muslim holidays will one day no longer be in conflict with school, even if she is not here to see that day.

"I didn't do this only for myself," Saeid said. "I did this for everyone."

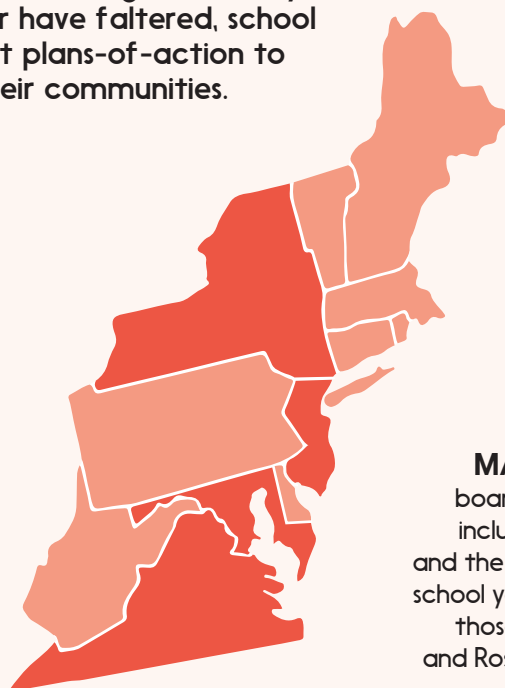
A LETTER

EAST COAST INITIATIVE

While efforts for the ICCSD to observe religious holidays such as Eid-al-Adha and Eid-al-Fitr have faltered, school districts have formulated different plans-of-action to address the growing diversity in their communities.

NEW JERSEY: The Paterson Public School District encompasses a racially diverse community. Taking this into consideration, the district allows students one day off for each major religion chosen annually by the school board with support from local religious leaders.

VIRGINIA: The school districts of Fairfax and Prince George have implemented a policy that started in the 2017-18 school year that will prevent tests and major school events from occurring on Muslim or Jewish holidays.



NEW YORK: The New York City Department of Education has had Jewish holidays off since the 1960s and began to observe Eid-al-Fitr and Eid-al-Adha in the 2015-16 school year. About 10 percent of the students in the district are Muslim, and Mayor Bill de Blasio said the change was made to respect the strength of the city's diverse communities.

MARYLAND: The Howard County school board expanded its religious observances to include Eid-al-Adha, the Hindu holiday Diwali and the eve of Lunar New Year in the 2016-17 school year. Students do not have school during those holidays along with Jewish Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah in order to accommodate the county's diverse population.

Sources: Washington Post and Christian Science Monitor

According to numerous American educational and religious organizations, school districts should do the following to ensure that people of all religions are equally represented:

Develop policies about the treatment of religious holidays in the curriculum and inform parents of these policies

Offer pre-service and in-service workshops to assist teachers and administrators in understanding the appropriate placement of religious holidays in schools

Become familiar with the nature and needs of the religious groups in the school community

Provide resources for teaching about religions and religious holidays in ways that are constitutionally permissible and educationally sound

Source: Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction