CAIR
www.cair.com

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. By 2050, Muslims are anticipated to be the second largest religious group in America. 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 student population. Studies show that most Muslim children are enrolled in public schools, a demographic that should be addressed when dealing with issues of diversity and accommodations.

Across faith communities, religious practices have many similarities, although the details of time and practice 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 supportive academic environment. It also serves as a guide for the accommodation of religiously-mandated practices of Muslim students and their families. This guide outlines general Islamic beliefs and practices. However, individual applications of these observances may vary.

By 2050, Muslims are anticipated to be the second largest religious group in America. American Muslims are found in all sectors of society.

U. S. LEGAL PROTECTIONS OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, religious celebrations, and dietary and clothing requirements are all components of Islamic rituals and practices. 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 the government from establishing a state religion.

- Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination based on 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.

Some legal protections of religious practices that have been affirmed by the U.S. Department of Education include:

- Students may organize prayer groups and religious clubs to the same extent that students are permitted to organize other non-curricular student activity groups.

- Public schools generally may adopt policies relating to student dress and school uniforms to the extent consistent with constitutional and statutory civil rights protections. Schools may not, however, target religious attire in general, or the attire of a particular religion, for prohibition or regulation.

- Schools may excuse students from class to remove a burden on their religious exercise, including prayer or fasting, at least where doing so would not impose material burdens on other students. It would be constitutional for schools to excuse students from class to enable them to fulfill their religious obligations regarding prayer, fasting, holidays, or other observances. Alternative arrangements for religious exercises (i.e. praying) may take place during lunch breaks or between classes if the students determine that an excuse from class creates a burden.

Many federal laws contain provisions that protect religious practices from government infringement. Many include important legal protections that require schools to act against bullying and harassment of students that is based on race, color, national origin, sex, or disability. 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.

DIETARY REQUIREMENTS

The Quran (Islam's scripture) prohibits consumption of alcohol, pork, and any pork by-products or derivatives. Therefore, practicing 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 examples of 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 school meal 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. Most schools provide non-meat options or other alternatives to objectionable food items. School officials should be mindful not to cross-contaminate food with pork (i.e using the same pizza cutter that has contacted pepperoni pizza without being previously cleaned or removing pork products from a previously prepared meal). 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 demonstrate their modesty.

When necessary, 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, some Muslim women and girls 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 be vigilant in preventing classmates from teasing, touching, 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.

Islam prescribes that both men and women behave and dress modestly.

ADOLESCENCE AND GENDER RELATIONS

Puberty is a major turning point in the life of all children. For Muslim children who have reached puberty, Islam prescribes certain parameters for relations between persons of a different sex.

For example, many Muslims are reluctant to shake hands with persons of a different sex even with teachers or administrators. Some Muslims may not look at persons of different sexes directly. This should not be taken as an insult, but as a sign of personal modesty. A popular alternative to shaking hands is a "hand on heart" greeting, which is a common gesture in many Muslim majority nations.

Physical Education

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

Muslim girls may choose to wear a modest swimsuit which covers the whole body except for face, hands, and feet, while being light enough for swimming.

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

Muslim students should not be forced to participate in coed 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.

Muslims may raise religious objections to coed physical education classes and to school-sponsored dances. Activities where students of different sexes 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 accommodation or with an alternate activity.

In addition, Muslim students may choose not to bow in any activity that requires them to do so. Martial arts classes are a key place where this may occur. Muslims uphold the belief that bowing is exclusive to Islamic prayer for the purpose of submitting themselves to God only.

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 on the school calendar. Due to the visual appearance or non-appearance of the new moon, there is uncertainty in the actual date of Muslim holidays.

Pronunciation Guide:

Eid al-Fitr: EED ull-FITTr

Eid al-Adha: EED ull-AHD-ha

Eid Mubarak: EED moo-BAR-ak

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 first 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 or "Eid Kareem."

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, many Muslims assert that the exact date cannot be determined with certainty until a few days before the holiday by a religious authority. 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 refrain from marking students with an unexcused absence when they do not attend school on Eid.

Also, major events (games, exams, plays, etc.) should be scheduled around these holidays.

Most states permit a certain number of excused absences for religious holidays. The First Amendment's Free Exercise clause upholds that students should not be penalized for being absent due to religious observance.

FASTING

The month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, is the time when Muslims are required to fast if their health permits. 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 fasts during Ramadan means refraining from eating and drinking from 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 an alternative space instead of the cafeteria during lunch. Also, they should be excused from strenuous physical activities 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.

In order to foster a supportive educational environment, many schools invite Muslim students or guest speakers to explain the practices and traditions surrounding the Ramadan fast. This will help Muslim students avoid feelings of awkwardness and isolation for not eating or drinking during the month and promote empathy from other students in the school.

Although giving the opportunity to students to share about their religious practices is a notable act of inclusion, sometimes students may feel uncomfortable to share without prior notice. It is important that the teacher recognize each student's needs individually and ask if they would like to share. 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 entity 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 worshipers," "sand n--gers," "towel heads," or "camel jockeys." Others are called "terrorists" or are taunted with references to violent extremists. Young Muslim women are often particularly vulnerable and have been subjected to physical assault or forceful removal of their headscarves (i.e. hijabs).

School boards may want to review policies and programs in light of the growing 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 comprehensive sex education material presented in schools are 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. Close contact with local Islamic centers is essential to encourage input from the Muslim community.

Access to course materials, parental consent, and the option to opt-out of family life and comprehensive sex education are determined on a state and local level. Educators should consult with their school district or state's department of education to be advised on existing options available for parents.

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 as a form of respect 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. The exemption from reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools has been upheld by the 1943 Supreme Court ruling *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* on the basis that the state could not compel speech from any individual.

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, an afternoon prayer (*Dhuhr*) and a late afternoon prayer (*Asr*), may fall within regular school hours. It usually takes less than 15 minutes to accomplish the religious requirements of the prayer.

While public schools may not prescribe prayers, nothing in the First Amendment affirms that public schools are a "religious-free zone" in the sense that students must leave their private religious expression at the school doors. Daily prayers fall under the "private religious speech" doctrine, which the U.S. Supreme Court has affirmed in numerous cases as fully protected under the Free Speech clause and the Free Exercise clause of the First Amendment.

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, Muslims stand, bow and touch their forehead to the ground. Prayer may be performed in any quiet, clean space individually or in congregation. 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 worshiper during the prayer. During prayer, Muslims are fully engaged in worship and may not respond verbally when engaged in conversation. Students and teachers should not take offense if the worshiper does not answer their call during prayer. However prayer may be stopped by the worshiper in case of an emergency.

Prayer may be performed in any quiet, clean space individually or in congregation.

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 or a meeting space, 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 Jummah. Jum'ah lasts about one hour and takes place at the mosque or prayer space during midday prayer. The service is similar to a Sunday church service, with a khutbah, or sermon, from a religious 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 meal items that contain pork or pork by-products (i.e. a picture or icon 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 as unexcused absence and note that their absence is excused for a religious holiday.

Ramadan Fast

- Allow students to remain indoors (i.e 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 and allow for alternative modest athletic-wear.
- Accommodate schedule requests for students preferring same sex physical education courses.
- Provide students with alternate activities if they cannot participate.

Gender Relations

- Do not extend your hand first for a handshake with members of a different sex. Allow them to either extend their hand or not.
- Avoid touching when comforting students and parents of different genders.
- Respect students' boundaries and allow them to

choose whether they wish to hug, hold hands, or lower their eye contact with members of a different sex.

Family Life/Sex Education Program

- Allow parents reasonable time to review any material dealing with comprehensive sex education.
- Allow parents to opt-out their child from all or part of the family life curriculum in accordance with state and local laws.

Prayer

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

Fairness in Classroom and Text Presentations

- Ensure textbooks and curricula are free from religious bias and are culturally sensitive.
- Invite Muslim speakers to social studies and world religion classes.
- Encourage class discussion that embraces diversity, tolerance, and an inclusive classroom environment.

GLOSSARY OF MUSLIM TERMS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) is America's largest Muslim civil liberties and advocacy organization. Our mission is to enhance the understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American Muslims, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding.

© Copyright 2024

Council on American-Islamic Relations
www.cair.com