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Montgomery schools take no action on Muslim holidays

By Donna St. George, Published: November 16

Montgomery County school leaders adopted a calendar for next school year without voting on the broader question of giving a day off to students for one of the major Muslim holy days.

But members of the Montgomery County Board of Education also signaled that they would continue to study the issue and asked that school staff look into creating fixed standards for granting such requests.

The decision to adopt the calendar, in a 5 to 2 vote, followed a strong push by Muslim community leaders in recent months to request that schools be closed for the Islamic holiday of Eid al-Adha, which fell on Oct. 15 this year. Muslim leaders pointed out that Montgomery schools are closed for Christian and Jewish holidays, arguing that it was a matter of fairness.

But as the issue was considered last week, school leaders noted that Islamic holidays will fall on non-school days in 2014. Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of Ramadan, will be celebrated in July. Eid al-Adha, known as the festival of the sacrifice, falls on Oct. 4, a Saturday.

Still, the board's discussion illuminated enduring questions about how and when schools decide to shut their doors for a religious holiday.

School officials have said the operational impact of a holiday is key. They say they cannot legally observe a religious holiday and instead look to factors such as high absenteeism. Muslim leaders had urged Muslim families and non-Muslim supporters to keep students home from school this year on Eid al-Adha as a display of the holiday's impact.

But district figures showed that the effort fell short, with 5.6 percent of students and 5 percent of teachers not in school on Eid al-Adha. On the previous Tuesday, a normal school day, 3.2 percent of students and 4.2 percent of teachers were absent.

Though it was a slight increase, Montgomery officials said it was not out of the normal range. This underscored the question: How much absenteeism is enough to qualify for a school holiday?

State law provides for school holidays timed with Christmas and Easter. Closing schools for Jewish holidays began in the 1970s in Montgomery.

At Tuesday's meeting, Philip Kauffman, the board's vice president, said the district had documents from 1973 that showed high rates of absence for Jewish holidays. The documents suggest that 15 percent or more of students and staff were absent for the first day of Rosh Hashanah in 1973 and previous years.

"It has been suggested that we're asking for something different from the Muslim community that we did not do for the Jewish community," Kauffman said. But, he said, "clearly we did make the decision based on statistics back in 1973."

Board Member Michael Durso said the figures did not resolve the issue for him, saying that the situation creates a difficult scenario for Muslim families.

"What do we say to Muslim parents who have to explain to their children the intricacies of how this decision is made when in the eyes of those families they're not being dealt with in the same fashion as others?" Durso asked.

Board President Christopher Barclay said the school system needs set methods to use in considering the issue. "I am not prone to do something quickly, but I am prone to have a clear standard," Barclay said.

Amal Muhtaseb, a Montgomery mother of three, told board members that her eldest daughter was not able to enjoy her holiday because she was missing a math test. She said she wanted her children to be treated "the same way their Christian and Jewish classmates are."

Another parent, Khaled Abuhatab, said his 7-year-old stayed home for Eid al-Adha but the next day stepped off his school bus complaining that he had double the homework because he had not been in school on the holiday.

Under district policy, students are excused for religious holiday absences, and teachers are not supposed to give tests. But Muslim families say their sons and daughters should not have to miss instruction and that the conflict is especially hard on older students.

Saqib Ali, a former state lawmaker and co-chair of the Equality for Eid Coalition, said he was pleased that two board members — Durso and student member Justin Kim — indicated support by voting against the county's school calendar.

Ali said he was also heartened by the decision to look into what it would take to grant a day off and hoped his group might be involved in finding a creative solution. "There is definitely some progress since last year," Ali said.

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