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Coalition wants Montgomery County schools to close on Muslim holidays [by Lindsay A. Powers](#)
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A coalition of local Muslims and others are urging Montgomery County Public Schools to close on two holidays, which the coalition's co-chair, Saqib Ali, framed as a civil rights issue.

Besides an amended county school system calendar, the Equality for Eid Coalition — sponsored by the Maryland chapter of the Council of American Islamic Relations — wants students and staff members to skip school on Oct. 15 and instead celebrate Eid al-Adha.

Supporters can sign the coalition's online petition at www.equality4eid.com. As of Monday, it had about 260 signatures.

The coalition, which formed about a year ago, also wants schools to close when classes conflict with another Muslim holiday, Eid al-Fitr. However, for at least the next three years, Eid al-Fitr will fall on days during the school system's summer break.

Both Eid holidays fall on different days each year, as they follow the Islam lunar calendar.

Eid al-Adha marks the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. Eid al-Fitr celebrates the end of Ramadan, according to the coalition's website.

The issue was discussed by the county Board of Education in November 2012, when it opted not to close school on the Muslim holidays after parents and community leaders requested it.

School system staff reported at the time there was not a high absentee rate on the holiday in the past three years.

Ali — a state delegate from 2007 to 2011 who has filed to run again next year — said, however, the coalition thinks attendance is “not the right question to ask.”

The decisions to close school on or near Christian and Jewish holidays were not based on similar analyses of attendance records, Ali said, and Muslim holidays should not be held to a different standard.

“If we're only going to use them (the attendance studies) for certain communities, that's not equitable,” Ali said.

Ali said the number of Muslim students in the county school system is unknown.

"But we know there's a significant number and it seems to be growing," he said.

According to its website, the coalition's supporters include Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett, County Council President Nancy Navarro, and seven state senators and delegates.

Montgomery County Board of Education member Philip Kauffman (At-large) of Olney said it boils down to what the law allows.

"We need evidence of student absences or staff absences that would impact on the delivery of instruction," he said.

The school system will monitor absences this year, he said, though past studies in recent years have not indicated a "discernable trend."

Schools close on Christian holidays such as Christmas and Good Friday under state law.

Chief Operating Officer Larry Bowers said the school system added Jewish holidays such as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur based on low attendance from Jewish teachers and students on the holidays.

The school system, however, does not have records showing how it came to the decision in the early 1970s, he said.

Since then, Bowers said, case law has arisen that lets districts close schools only for secular purposes.

"We make it clear that these are excused absences, but we, at this stage, we really need to follow the law," Kauffman said.

The school system recognizes both Muslim holidays by declaring them nontesting days and giving Muslim students excused absences.

Mimi Hassanein, outreach coordinator for the Islamic Society of Germantown, said she personally has advocated on this issue for about 25 years and joined the campaign about a year ago.

Hassanein has had three children go through the county school system and has five grandchildren currently attending. She said she has had a "positive" experience in her efforts to help educate school system teachers and staff about Muslim holidays and culture.

Yet, she wants schools to close in observance of the Eids, either entirely or just for students.

Hassanein said the school system has been more sensitive to Muslim students and staff by trying not to schedule exams or introduce new topics in class.

But, she said, "it varies from school to school. It's not set in stone."

In her experience, she said, about half of Muslim families have their children miss school to celebrate an Eid holiday.

Montgomery County Council member George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park has supported efforts to close school on Muslim holidays in the past and said he thinks the school system eventually will decide to close schools.

"It poses a conflict for people who want to exercise their right to religious observance," Leventhal said.

If schools remain open, he said, parents and students "highly motivated toward academic achievement" will go to school instead of celebrating.

If schools were open on a Jewish holiday such as Rosh Hashanah, Leventhal said, he thinks "a substantial number" of Jewish students would attend classes.

Leventhal said the school system has "a lot of flexibility" when it comes to closing schools.

"They've drawn the line at Christians and Jews, and that's exclusionary," he said.

Area mosques and organizations, including Jews United for Justice, which has an activism focus in the Washington, D.C., area, are supporting the campaign.

Rebecca Ennen, the organization's development and communications manager, said generally holidays are "crucial and central" to a religious group's community and identity.

"When those don't get recognized, it's a real negation of what our values are and what we stand for," she said.

The coalition plans to hold a press conference Monday outside the Montgomery County Council Office Building in Rockville announce itself and its mission.

The school board is scheduled to discuss the issue next in the fall of 2014.

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