

## Schools face a dilemma on holy days

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Though most public school districts in area communities will close Monday for Yom Kippur, one of the holiest days on the Jewish calendar, Littleton's schools will be in session.

Last spring the local School Committee voted to remove Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, and Good Friday, the Christian observance of Jesus's crucifixion, as school holidays. The committee's reasoning was that there are many religions represented in the system's student population, and, though fairness would dictate that each of their holidays be observed, the school calendar could not accommodate them all.

But after people in the community complained, the committee expects to reestablish Yom Kippur and Good Friday as holidays next school year.

"We're looking to be as inclusive as possible," said School Committee member Paul Avella, but "the more we explored this . . . it became apparent that a significant number of people wanted to keep those dates" as holidays.

Littleton's difficulty in removing religious holidays from the school calendar highlights the issue's sensitivity and complexity. As religious diversity increases and time demands on school systems intensify, several communities have explored the issue. Some have removed the holidays, but not without objections from people who believe students should not have to make the choice between religious observances and school.

The issue of school activities on religious holidays came to the fore last week when the Massachusetts State Track Coaches Association held a statewide invitational meet on Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, and a number of Jewish athletes could not participate. Officials from the association apologized, but said Friday was the only date they could hold the meet.

A survey of public school districts across the area found that most do not hold classes on Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Good Friday. However, some districts have amended, or at least tried to amend, their academic calendars to remain open on all religious observances that do not fall on a weekend or during school vacations.

Officials say Christmas, the Christian observance of the birth of Jesus, is not technically a religious holiday for schools because it falls during winter break.

The Nashoba Regional School District, which covers Bolton, Lancaster, and Stow, has kept its schools open on all religious holidays since the 2004-05 academic calendar, Superintendent Michael Wood said. It took several years, however, for the change to become permanent.

"It was certainly bumpy at the beginning," said Wood. "But over time, people have gotten used to it."

He said the change came about in an effort to treat all religious observances equally. Now school is in session, but students can be excused from classes and

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other school work in order to observe their faith's holidays. Closing the schools to observe all religious holidays would be difficult, he said.

"In order to be truly respectful of all religious holidays, it would just make for a really disjointed calendar," he said.

Marlborough amended its policies in 2000 to keep schools open on all religious observances, said Jim Jolicoeur, the district's assistant superintendent. Historically, the only religious holiday that closed schools was Good Friday.

"We can have some concern during collective bargaining negotiations from our staff . . . but there hasn't been much concern or feedback from parents" recently, Jolicoeur said. "There was initial conflict with staff, but ultimately the change was accepted and everyone moved forward from there."

Shrewsbury formerly closed schools on Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Good Friday. But after a survey of local families found that "there was only a small percentage of respondents who felt school should not be in session on those days," the district has kept its doors open on the religious holidays since the 2006-07 academic year, said Superintendent Joe Sawyer.

"We try to be sensitive to the issue. For people who do observe the holidays, we've been able to accommodate them," said Sawyer, adding there has been an overall positive response to making the three religious holidays into "productive school days. It minimizes how deep we go into June."

The list of area school systems that observe Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Good Friday includes Framingham, Hopkinton, Lexington, Natick, Needham, Newton, Northborough-Southborough, Sudbury, and Wayland.

However, as demands on school systems increase and fewer districts close for religious observances, some religious leaders and other community members are becoming more concerned.

"Certainly education is of high importance, and there can be a balance maintained," said the Rev. Adam Reid, associate pastor at the Roman Catholic St. Mary's Parish in Shrewsbury. "But, I don't think it is necessary to have classes on major days of high importance of faith traditions."

He said it is especially important not to have extracurricular activities, such as athletic events, on a religion's holy days.

"Sports, we find, can conflict quite readily with practicing faith," Reid said, mentioning conflicts on days such as Good Friday, which is observed two days before Easter Sunday each spring. "I think that they could be held on another day."

In Littleton, where Rosh Hashana has not been an official holiday, School Committee member Avella said that classes will be in session on Yom Kippur this year because a calendar change cannot be made in time. Students who are observing the day, which begins at sundown Sunday and ends at nightfall Monday, will be excused from classes and school work. Whether schools will close for Good Friday, which falls on April 2 next spring, has yet to be determined, he said.

With Littleton schools open on Monday, Leann Shamash, the education director at Congregation Beth Elohim, an Acton synagogue that serves several communities, including Littleton, said she expects some students and their families may miss parts of its Yom Kippur services, which draw around 600 adults and 200 children.

"I know how pressured the kids are at school, and it's very hard for them to miss a day," she said.

Littleton's offer to excuse students from classes and school work is well-intentioned, Shamash said, but they "will still feel like they're missing something."

However, the Rev. Deborah Blanchard, with the First Baptist Church of Littleton, said she believes that people of faith can still observe Good Friday “in ways meaningful to them . . . whether it’s in a church service or somewhere else by themselves.”

Keeping schools open on religious holidays is not an easy decision, Blanchard said.

“I think the town of Littleton is trying to be extremely fair . . . and listen to a majority of the voices,” she said.

State and federal laws require schools to make reasonable accommodation to the religious needs of students and employees in observance of holy days, according to the state’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Additionally, state regulations require districts to schedule classes on at least 185 days, and to operate the schools on at least 180 days.

Last winter’s numerous snowstorms and an ice storm that knocked out power in some communities for several days complicated the issue for a number of local systems. The Groton-Dunstable Regional district opted to hold classes on Good Friday, typically a holiday, to help make up for the lost days, said the superintendent’s administrative assistant, Melissa Sweeney.

The district did not receive any complaints, she said, and keeping schools in session on Good Friday might be discussed once staff contracts expire at the end of this year.

In Harvard, another local community hit hard last winter, a proposal to adjust the academic calendar to stay open on religious observances was turned down by the School Committee in April.

“Schools need to be tolerant and understanding and make appropriate accommodations” for those observing religious holidays, said Superintendent Thomas Jefferson. “If we were to have school on those days, we would put those absent at a disadvantage.”

According to the Waltham superintendent’s office, the district added Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur as nonschool days several years ago to go along with Good Friday, which had been its only religious holiday.

Hudson’s public schools and the Berlin-Boylston Regional district close only for Good Friday.

In Brookline schools, which observes Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Good Friday, Superintendent William Lupini said attendance on those days would be very low if classes were held.

“If anything, the conversation in our district is about adding additional days,” he said.

Groups in some districts have advocated observing other religious holidays, including two of the holiest days of the Islamic faith - Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of Ramadan, and Eid al-Adha, or the Festival of Sacrifice. ■

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