

October 25, 2021

Hon. Stella Pekarsky
And Members of the Fairfax County School Board
Gatehouse Administration Center
8115 Gatehouse Road
Falls Church, VA 22042

Dear Chairwoman Pekarsky and Fellow School Board Members:

With the end of the Jewish fall holidays, we write to share with you feedback regarding the impact of the new “O” calendar on Jewish students, parents, and teachers within Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS). Our reflections are based on information gathered through a JCRC online survey that yielded nearly 100 responses, and on conversations with numerous Jewish FCPS stakeholders.

When the Board adopted this year’s calendar in March, FCPS touted the new “O” system for its equity and inclusivity, stating that it would, “ensure[s] students will not have to make choices between honoring their religious or cultural observance, or taking a test this coming school year.” Unfortunately, the new calendar is not living up to these expectations, and accomplished little, if anything, to remedy the serious, widespread annual failure to accommodate Jewish students and staff seeking to observe our holiest days of the year. **In fact, the calendar has put even greater stress and demands upon Jewish students and employees, burdening them with the responsibility to ensure that it is adhered to by teachers and administrators.**

JCRC Survey

The JCRC created an informal survey to assess Jewish FCPS stakeholders’ experiences in observing the Jewish High Holidays with the new “O” calendar in place. We received 92 responses, 14% of which were from teachers and administrators with the remainder being from parents and students. Nearly 60% of FCPS high schools and secondary schools were represented among the respondents.

Of the respondents who missed school or work on either Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur or both:

- Over 80% said they or their children “experienced stress and anxiety around the holidays”
- While 38 – 40% of respondents reported that teachers were accommodating, 30% said that their teacher(s) were not supportive of them (or their children) missing school
- Only 2 respondents indicated that the “O” curriculum was helpful for their child, family, or work situation.

Incidents reported by survey respondents and other parents included:

- 12 Back-to-school nights scheduled on Yom Kippur Eve
- Tests and quizzes scheduled on the first day of Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur



- New material taught on Rosh Hashanah or on Yom Kippur
- Final reviews for exams on “O” days
- Teachers asking Jewish students to self-identify and state whether they would be missing school on the relevant “O” days, to assess whether they would be able to teach new material in violation of FCPS policy, putting an unacceptable, potentially socially ostracizing burden on these students
- Students forced to self-identify as Jewish in class to challenge the scheduling of tests or quizzes on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, once again putting the onus on the students and causing unnecessary stress and embarrassment
- School picture day scheduled on Yom Kippur
- Student penalized and singled out for being unable to attend band practice on “O” day
- Mandatory audition scheduled on second day of Rosh Hashanah with no make-up opportunity offered (not an “O” day, but student was still entitled to accommodations)
- Lockdown drill on Yom Kippur
- Parent-Student Driver’s Education event on “O” Day
- Insufficient time offered to make up missed work after the holiday
- Fairfax County PTA Council event scheduled on “O” day, excluding Jewish parents
- Required teachers’ meetings on Yom Kippur, with accommodations varying from supervisor to supervisor

Additional feedback from teachers and administrators

In the weeks leading up to and during the High Holiday period, the JCRC spoke with a range of Jewish teachers and administrators, who all reported struggles with the new “O” calendar, including:

- Difficulty in securing substitutes so that they could be absent on the relevant “O” days
- Scheduling of required staff meetings on Yom Kippur --- there was variation from school to school, and from supervisor to supervisor, in providing accommodations and when necessary, adjusting schedules
- Perceived resentment among non-Jewish teachers who felt compelled to cover for teachers who could not secure substitutes on the relevant holidays
- Serious challenges in teaching required curriculum with no fewer than 14 “O” days --- as opposed to the four closure days initially recommended last year by the task force on religious accommodations and the FCPS calendar committee
- Inclusion of non-critical religious holidays on the “O” observances list, most conspicuously the last day of Passover (not to mention omission of far more relevant days, such as the second day of Rosh Hashanah and the first day of Passover), highlighting the lack of cultural competency and community input involved in the creation of this year’s calendar.

Conclusion

It is telling that the JCRC received 92 responses to a simple, informal online survey, reporting dozens of incidents at numerous schools. We can reasonably infer that the actual number of Jewish students and employees who suffered through similar incidents and experiences is much, much higher. And these

numbers reflect only FCPS' Jewish population. We have no reason to believe that the "O" calendar will work any better for our Muslim, Hindu and Sikh coalition partners during their holiday periods.

While some of the conflicts described here, such as the one concerning Back-to-School nights, were remedied, our impression is that most were not. **The system created by the "O" calendar unfairly puts the onus on Jewish children, parents and staff to ensure that their rights are being protected and that faculty and other staff are complying with school district policy.** Many Jewish FCPS stakeholders are understandably reluctant to assume that burden on their own, and deal with possible negative repercussions. Given that reality, it is remarkable how many Jewish students and staff still chose to stay home and miss work or school on the first day of Rosh Hashanah and on Yom Kippur.

The report recently issued by Governor Northam's Task Force on Culturally Inclusive School Meals and Calendars (convened partly in response to the controversy surrounding passage of the "O" calendar), states in its introduction:

"All students, educators, and families should feel a sense of belonging in their schools and institutions of higher education. Religious and ethnic minorities may feel isolated when choosing how to observe a holiday that falls on a school day, especially if their institution does not acknowledge the observances important to their traditions. By proactively and intentionally creating an inclusive academic calendar, PK-12 schools and higher education institutions can foster belonging and equity for all stakeholders."

We strongly believe that the "O" calendar does little more than pay lip service to this aspirational directive. There is a better path for FCPS, the one adopted by neighboring Arlington, Loudoun and Prince William counties. We look forward to continuing to work with the Fairfax School Board and FCPS administration to achieve true equity and inclusion for the district's minority-faith students.

Sincerely,

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