

All Dulles Area Muslim Society (ADAMS) • Durga Temple of Virginia •
Hindu American Foundation • McLean Islamic Center •
Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation • Sikh Foundation of Virginia •
The Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington

February 9, 2021

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

Dear Chairwoman Anderson and Fellow School Board Members:

We write to you today on behalf of hundreds of thousands of Muslims, Jews, Hindus and Sikhs across Fairfax County to express our deep disappointment at the School Board's recent discussions regarding the 2021-2022 academic calendar. We were shocked to observe the Board's deliberations at its work meeting last week, which completely dismissed the recommendations of the FCPS Religious Observances Task Force and of the FCPS Calendar Committee. On both process and substance, our minority-faith community members are left to conclude that after investing in a nearly 18-month process they trusted, one which was initiated by the Board itself, their voices are still being ignored.

We strenuously object to the Board's lack of transparency in this matter. Simultaneously, as members of the Religious Observances Task Force, we feel the need to respond in good faith to many of the questions that were raised during your work session -- even as our confidence in this process has suffered a serious blow. We especially reject the pitting of academic equity against religious equity, a false, divisive binary that will undermine respect and cooperation among various groups within FCPS. The goals of religious accommodation and educational equity can and must be simultaneously pursued and accomplished.

We urge you to give our renewed input the credence and weight it deserves, both for the benefit of FCPS families and for the credibility of the Board itself. We demand that you honor the crystal-clear recommendations of both the Task Force and the Calendar Committee by adopting either one of the two options that were originally presented to you, Calendar Option A or Calendar Option B.

Discussion

1. Lack of transparency and respect for inclusive process

In 2019, the Fairfax School Board authorized the creation of an ad hoc Religious Observances Task Force with the mandate to:

“review current policies and practices regarding religious holidays, observances and practices of our students and staff. . . . The goal of the committee will be to help identify and recommend areas of improvement that may include communication, education, and regulations related to our school year calendar and appropriate accommodations of religious obligations during the

school day. The committee will review best practices and policies from within our system as well as those in other schools' divisions. ... ***with a goal of bringing recommendations to the full Board before consideration of the SY21-22 calendar***" (emphasis added).

The undersigned organizations are all honored to serve on this Task Force, which met diligently prior to the onset of the COVID pandemic. Our community leaders devoted extensive time and energy over the course of nearly six months to fulfill the Board's mandate. After a thorough, open process of discussion and deliberation, the Task Force recommended that the FCPS calendar include school closures on days coinciding with four minority-faith religious observances.

We understood that our recommendations would be referred to and given strong consideration by both the FCPS Calendar Committee and the School Board. And, in fact, the Calendar Committee did fully adopt our recommendations: BOTH of the two draft calendars ultimately submitted to the Board included school closures on days coinciding with Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Eid and Diwali. Both calendars were in turn presented to the public in a community survey, reinforcing the understanding that these were the only options under consideration. In August 2020, our coalition submitted a joint letter to the Board endorsing both drafts, and several coalition members testified in support of this long-awaited policy change.

Many months passed between the submission of the two calendar options to the Board and the February 2nd working session; during that interval there was never any hint, let alone notification to the public or to our Task Force, that a third calendar option, not including the four recommended closure days, would be introduced. The lack of transparency and respect for our communities is astounding and has generated significant anger and pain.

2. Unacceptable pitting of academic equity and religious equity

The chief reason offered for the introduction of calendar Option C is that the Board is faced with an untenable choice between "academic equity" and "religious equity." This is a false and reckless binary. The Board of Education has a responsibility to ensure equity for all FCPS students, and we strongly favor meaningful measures to support learners who have disproportionately suffered academic losses during the pandemic. At the same time, we strongly object to the Board pitting differing minority groups against one another, thereby driving a wedge between the Muslim, Hindu and Jewish communities and the Black, Brown and special needs communities. Indeed, very often these communities intersect. At a time of acute racial, political, and social polarization, we are disappointed that the Board chooses to divide rather than unite.

Moreover, it strains credulity to assert that the four new closure days included in Options A and B will meaningfully impact FCPS' attempt to remedy the enormous academic losses suffered by vulnerable students after nearly one full year of distance learning. This is true regardless of how far the school year extends into June. However, should the Board insist on an earlier end date for the academic year, we are confident that there are ways to achieve that goal without continuing to unfairly disadvantage children of minority faiths.

3. "Secular" calendars, prioritizing religions, and attendance as a flawed data point

The importance of maintaining a “secular” school calendar was invoked during the work session. The secular justifications for adding these four school closure days to the FCPS calendar were carefully considered by our Task Force and were spelled out in our August 2020 coalition letter.

With respect to attendance data: as Mr. Peri pointed out during the work session, such data is a flawed indicator in this situation. It is well-known that public school students and employees very often feel forced to attend work and classes on even their most sacred holidays, for fear of being penalized or academically disadvantaged.

The proposed closures do not favor some religions over others. The Task Force (which included Baha’i, Korean, and Christian representatives) determined that these specific closures were justified for two reasons. First, the Jewish, Muslim and Hindu populations in Northern Virginia have particularly skyrocketed over the last two decades. The size of the NoVa Jewish community, for example, has increased by 80% from 2003 to 2017. Second, not every minority faith requires school closures as a critical accommodation. For some minority-faith communities, issues regarding bullying, clothing, food, lack of cultural competency, and curricular inaccuracies are far bigger concerns. The Task Force was in fact beginning to delve into those issues when the pandemic began and our work was halted.

4. Improving compliance not a reasonable solution

Several Board members invoked the well-worn, unrealistic suggestion of improving compliance with existing policies, as an alternative to school closures. Unfortunately, compliance with FCPS’ accommodation policies is perennially inconsistent, and we have no reason to believe that will change. As we noted in our August 2020 letter, “administrators have the nearly impossible task of monitoring individual teachers’ test schedules and classroom procedures regarding missed days, across one of the largest school systems in the United States, to ensure that impacted minority students are treated equitably and respectfully.” Targeted, secularly justified closures will alleviate much of this burden.

5. Consistency across Northern Virginia

Should the FCPS Board reject both Options A and B it will stand out as a laggard behind fellow school districts across Northern Virginia that have recently adopted new inclusive, equitable school calendars. Prince William and Arlington approved calendars with school closures on Eid, Diwali, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur; Loudoun approved a calendar with closures on Eid, Diwali and Yom Kippur. Several of these school boards factored into their deliberations the importance of aligning school calendars across neighboring school districts, for the benefit of NoVa families with parents employed in one school district while their children attend school in the next.

Conclusion

FCPS’ mission statement proclaims that, “FCPS values its diversity and acknowledges that all people contribute to the well-being of the community. FCPS provides opportunities for all its students and employees to grow educationally, personally, and professionally.” For years, growing numbers of religious minority students within FCPS have felt barred from realizing the promise of this ideal.

We are troubled that FCPS’ natural progression to a more inclusive understanding of equity and diversity now stands to be thwarted. We urge you not to obstruct or delay progress, but rather to move forward

with confidence and conviction. This Board should be known not for disenfranchising and sowing division among minorities and ignoring the needs and dignity of thousands of FCPS families, but rather for fostering a school system that reflects the very best of American values ---- mutual respect, appreciation of the diversity that strengthens the fabric of our society, fairness, and unity.

Respectfully,

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cc: Dr. Scott Brabrand, FCPS Superintendent

Mr. Armando Peri, FCPS Ombudsman