

VOTE FOR RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

School board should include religious holidays in school calendar

The staff editorial represents the opinion of the majority of *The Highlander* editorial board

Fairfax County Public Schools, in the third most diverse county in Virginia, is utterly failing its religious minorities. After spending the last few years advocating for “cultural responsiveness” and being “equity minded,” FCPS School Board members have shown that they don’t practice what they preach.

On Feb. 2, the school board met to debate the proposed 2021-22 school year calendar. Last June, per the request of the school board, the FCPS Religious Observances Task Force and Calendar Committee introduced two variations of a calendar with student holidays for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Diwali and Eid al-Fitr.

Several school board members signaled they weren’t convinced that adding four days off to the school year was necessary, instead leaning toward approving a third option that neglected the holidays.

Nevertheless, when the time arrives, school board members need to approve one of the original calendar variations that makes these holidays days off for all FCPS students and staff.

“[The Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington (JCRC) and six other faith groups] participated in an 18-month process on an interfaith task force that had been created by the school board specifically to address issues [regarding religious holidays],” said Guila Franklin Siegel, associate director of the JCRC.



HAVING TO CHOOSE BETWEEN EITHER GOING TO SERVICES OR GOING IN AND TAKING A TEST SHOULDN'T BE AN OPTION."

**- ZACH GINSBERG
JUNIOR
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The task force put countless hours into carefully crafting two calendars, only for both to be completely disregarded by board members. The school board silently added a third calendar option, without the input from the very group whose sole purpose is to advise on calendar concerns.

“We had devoted a lot of time and energy and good faith to this process,” Siegel said. “Only two calendars had been presented to the community, and the board has been sitting on those calendars for months and months.”

Angered by the creation of a third calendar option, the seven faith groups sent a letter to school board members, expressing their dismay at hearing the lack of support behind the first two calendar options.

“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 group wrote in the letter. “The lack of transparency and respect for our communities is astounding and has generated significant anger and pain.”

At the meeting, several arguments were

made against the first two options. Several school board members and Superintendent Scott Brabrand stressed that the third option would be a better response to the COVID-19 pandemic, saying it would promote stability with two more instructional days and none of the additional days off for religious holidays.

“The calendar committee’s work finished prior to this pandemic...so that’s the distinction. [The third option] is a post-pandemic calendar; [the first two] are pre-pandemic calendars,” Brabrand said during the meeting.

While it’s true students need a sense of normalcy when returning next year, their entire school experience will not drastically change with four days off in a 10-month school year. The board could recommend other methods of recuperating learning loss if they believe it will affect students majorly. Pitting the issue of COVID relief against religious equity is unfair and solves nothing.

Another common argument from board members was that adding four holidays into the calendar ignores the many other religions and cultures in Fairfax County. While this is true, it is important to note that these holidays are just a starting point, and the board should make additions in the future. Being unable to cover all religions is not an excuse for covering none.

Some members said they wanted to vote for the third calendar but also push for more guidelines on not scheduling tests or big events on major religious holidays. While this may be well-intentioned, guidelines and recommendations can never truly be enforced and are just words on paper.





















“Having to choose between either going to services or going in and taking a test shouldn’t be an option,” said Zack Ginsberg, a junior at Lake Braddock Secondary School who was involved in starting a petition to support either of the first two calendar options.

The final and perhaps most appalling argument made at the meeting was by Braddock District representative Megan McLaughlin, who argued that the current calendar is secular and needs to stay that way.



2021-2022 Student Holiday Calendar Comparison

Counties Around Northern Virginia

Religious Observances	Counties Around Northern Virginia			
	Fairfax (calendar option C)	Prince William	Arlington	Loudoun
Rosh Hashanah				
Yom Kippur				
Diwali				
Eid al-Fitr				
Spring break aligned with Easter				

“This school system does not specifically honor Christian holidays. Winter break includes Christmas Day, a federal holiday, and New Year’s Day, a federal holiday,” McLaughlin said during the Feb. 2 meeting.

To believe that the calendar is completely devoid of any Christian influences is ridiculously naive. Spring break always lines up with Easter, and there are always several days off before Christmas for no apparent reason.

“Why is it an option to remove the observances of Diwali, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Eid—three major religions—and not even touch holiday break?” FCPS School Board member Melanie Meren said in the meeting. “Why is two weeks of holiday break intact? Why can’t we remove two or three days, still with Christmas Eve off? I think there has been a failure to really look at alternatives.”

FCPS school board members boast about the county’s diversity, but when it is actually time to pass measures that embrace different cultures and religions, they turn their heads in the other direction.

“When 90% of any portion of our

student population is not observing a holiday, but we close down, it is not just that they lose learning, but that their parents are scrambling,” McLaughlin said.

Quite frankly, the tone deaf nature of this statement is infuriating. Of course, child care is an issue to consider when deciding the calendar, but just because a group is the minority does not mean people in positions of power have the right to ignore them. McLaughlin’s reasoning sounds archaic and is a common justification for religious bigotry.

By not adding these religious holidays into the calendar, FCPS is telling its students of minority faiths that their holidays are burdensome and insignificant.

Obviously, deciding the schedule for a school year is incredibly complicated. However, the real debates should be about trying to reach a middle ground, not pitting one issue against the other. It is possible to remediate the trauma students experienced during the pandemic and respect minority faiths at the same time.

Using lazy arguments like there are ‘too many religions’ or that school is ‘too secular’ for the change does a disservice to students.

Every other county in the DMV area has days off for these religious holidays, so what is stopping FCPS from doing the same?

“Having these days off normalizes non-Christian faith traditions, identities, observances and people who adhere to those faith traditions,” Siegel said. “It should be a seamless part of the fabric of the FCPS community. And it’s hard to understand why this is such a difficult task to accomplish when all of the neighboring jurisdictions have managed to do it.”

The school board will hold a public hearing on March 4 and is scheduled to vote on the three calendar options for next school year on March 18. Until then, students should do their part in advocating for this issue by signing petitions and contacting their school board representatives.

Most importantly, the school board must remember that they represent a community of many faiths and should be working to create an equitable school system, one that doesn’t favor Christianity. It is crucial that school board members vote to pass a calendar that has Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, Diwali and Eid as student holidays.