

South Brunswick schools to close for two Muslim holy days

Published: Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 7:29 AM Updated: Tuesday, August 10, 2010, 7:49 AM



Tom Haydon/The Star-Ledger



TONY KURDZUK/THE STAR-

LEDGERSouth Brunswick's schools will close for two Muslim holy days this year. In a 2000 photo, a teacher walks the halls of South Brunswick High School.

SOUTH BRUNSWICK — As a Muslim growing up in East Brunswick, Atiya Aftab missed classes and had to make up school work to be with her family on two important holidays: Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of Ramadan, the Islamic holy month of fasting, and Eid al-Adha, the Feast of Sacrifice. As a mother of three in South Brunswick, Aftab has seen her children go through the same thing. Until now.

In a decision that sent ripples of hope across the Muslim community well beyond New Jersey, the South Brunswick Board of Education has approved school closings in the 2010-11 school year for two Islamic holy days.

To Aftab, it was an acknowledgment Muslims "are part of the community fabric."

To South Brunswick school board president Matthew Speesler, it was time the district needed "to recognize" the two Muslim holy days and the Hindu new year, Diwali.

About 10 of the nearly 600 school districts in New Jersey acknowledge Muslim holy days as official school holidays, according to the New Jersey School Board's Association. Paterson's school calendar recognizes them. Passaic's calendar includes Diwali, but not the Islamic holidays. Atlantic City lists Eid al-Fitr but not Eid al-Adha. Other districts that have closed for the holidays include Irvington, Prospect Park, Cliffside Park and Plainfield.

The school calendars in Woodbridge and Edison, which have large Asian populations, make no mention of the Muslim holy days.

In New York City, the issue of honoring Muslim holidays is political and controversial. Last month, the City Council passed a non-binding resolution calling for school closings on the same two Muslim holy

days, but Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who controls the school district, has opposed the closings for reasons he said have nothing to do with Islam.

"If you close the schools for every single holiday, there won't be any school," Bloomberg told the New York Times. "Educating our kids requires time in the classroom, and that's the most important thing to us."

That was the argument some parents expressed in opposing the holidays in South Brunswick.



Mitsu Yasukawa/The Star-

LedgerThe Bukhari family pose for family photos at their home in South Brunswick. Schools will close this year for two major Muslim holy days, Eid al-Fitr in Sept. and Eid al-Adha.

"There were a few parents that felt there were enough days off in the calendar and there shouldn't be any more days off for any type of holidays," Speesler said. "They weren't against other religious holidays. They were against adding more days off in general."

The two holy days this year fall on dates convenient for schools to close. Eid al-Fitr is Sept. 10, a day many schools will close for Rosh Hashana, the Jewish new year. The other Muslim holiday, Eid al-Adha, is Nov. 16, and will be scheduled as a staff development day.

The district also determined it had a large enough population of Asian Indians that the holiday would affect many of the district's children. While not all Asians are Muslim, many do adhere to the faith. Middlesex County has the state's highest concentration of Asian residents — 151,160 or 19 percent of the total population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. New Jersey is also home to an estimated 100 mosques and between 400,000 to 600,000 Muslims, according to the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

With schools closed on Eid al-Fitr, Muslim families will be able to attend early prayer meetings at a mosque, hold family gatherings and exchange gifts. On Eid al-Adha, known as the "big feast" and the day of sacrifice, families typically gather at mosques, community centers and rented halls to perform one of the most important morning prayers of the year.

The leader of the South Brunswick mosque, Imam Hamad Ahmad Chebli, said he has received numerous calls asking how he got the school board to agree. His advice was for Muslim community leaders to first become solid members of the local civic community.

"You start by working gradually. You start by supporting your library. You support your police department. You be proud to be an American, because that's what you are," said Chebli, who has lived in South Brunswick more than 20 years. "You don't come here one day and become president the next day."