

Paramus Board of Education
Paramus, New Jersey



Calendar Advisory Committee Report

Submitted to:

Paramus Board of Education

By:

Paramus Calendar Advisory Committee

December 14, 2015

Board Calendar Advisory Committee Report

I. Committee Members

Mr. Anthony Balestrieri, Chairman
Mrs. Joanne Bergmann
Mrs. Alison Donoghue
Mr. Jeffrey Warren

Administrative Support

Dr. Michele Robinson, Superintendent
Mr. Steven Cea, Business Administrator

II. Executive Summary

As it is extremely challenging to quantify the effects of a more diverse Paramus population in the context of closing schools, in keeping with case law regarding this issue, the Committee examined the impact of student and staff attendance on the District's ability to productively conduct class. To that end, the Committee collected and analyzed data that enabled it to quantify absenteeism within the District in a reliable and consistent manner. While the Paramus student population of about 3,900 is becoming more diverse, the absenteeism associated with religious absence is not at a level substantial enough at which a lesson plan would not be considered relevant. We estimate that the rate of absences for religious reasons on Eid al-Adha and Diwali, combined with other absences, is less than 6% of the total enrollment. This percentage represents fewer than two students in an average class of 20. However, the Committee does recommend that the Board make certain procedural and educational changes to reflect the diversity in our school system.

III. Charge

In response to community requests to consider closing schools during two Muslim holidays, and a Hindu holiday, the Board of Education established an advisory committee and charged it with examining the framework for considering when it is appropriate to close schools for religious holidays. In recognizing the importance of this matter, the Committee met on multiple occasions (November 23, December 1, December 7, December 8, and December 10) with the goal of making a recommendation to the full Board at the December 14 public Board meeting.

IV. Calendar

The Paramus school calendar incorporates 185 student days, 188 teacher days, and 191 new teacher days. By contract, the teacher days must fall between September 1 and June 30. State law requires a minimum of 180 instructional days. The 185 student days incorporate five emergency closing days (e.g., snow days). Any unused emergency closing days remain instructional days. Should the district utilize more than five emergency days, the days are to be taken from the April recess.

V. Legal Rationale

Several federal circuit court cases informed the Committee's data-informed approach to the issue. The courts have upheld the right of government entities to close on dates that coincide with religious holidays when done for secular (non-religious) reasons. Conversely, the courts have struck down efforts to close on religious holidays when government entities have not articulated valid secular reasons.

VI. Demographics

The Committee could not locate a reliable source of data to determine the number of Muslim residents in Paramus. The District does not maintain demographic information related to religious affiliation in its student information system, nor does the State of New Jersey require these data. The United States Census also does not include religious affiliation in its survey.

As part of this process, the Committee honored the request of Mr. Nick Matahen, a Paramus resident and a leader in the Muslim community, to provide input and data regarding the Muslim holidays. He distributed a report from the Coalition for Muslim School Holidays outlining the dates of observance for Eid in New York City schools. This document provided a rationale for determining the observance dates for the two Eid holidays based on the lunar calendar.

Mr. Matahen indicated that the Muslim community represents 8% to 10% of the Paramus residents, and shared three anecdotal references to support this assertion. First, he is affiliated with a local Muslim-based organization with a membership that includes about 2,600-2,700 residents of a total Paramus population of approximately 26,600, or 10%. Second, Mr. Matahen asserted that there are 20 Muslim students in Ridge Ranch School of a total student population of 327, or 6.1%. Third, Mr. Matahen asserted that approximately 30 students in last year’s high school graduating class of 321 were Muslim, representing 9.35% of the graduates.

In addition to reviewing above-referenced information, the Committee conducted an internet-based search to identify other sources of demographic data. This search revealed inconsistent information with regard to religious populations in Paramus; thus, we were unable to corroborate the information as reflected in the prior paragraph.

VII. Student Impact

The Committee recognizes that the demographic population in Paramus is changing. Understanding that these population changes in our community, taken as a whole, are extremely challenging to quantify, the Committee, in conjunction with the Administration, adopted a strategy to collect and review the absentee detail surrounding the holiday of Eid al-Adha for 2015. Table 1 summarizes the findings.

Table 1	Eid al-Adha (Sep 24, 2015)	<i>As stated, based on a class of twenty (20) students</i>	With an Error Factor of 100% in reported Religious Absence	<i>As stated, based on a class of twenty (20) students</i>
Religious Absence	109		218	
Total Enrollment	3,871		3,871	
Absence % - Religious	2.8%	0.56	5.6%	1.13
Absence % - Sick/Other	3.0%	0.61	3.0%	0.61
Attendance %	94.2%	18.83	91.4%	18.26
Total	100.0%	20.00	100.0%	20.00

Source: Genesis Student Information System

As a form of sensitivity analysis, the Committee chose to use an error factor of 100%, thereby assuming that the religious absenteeism could have been as high as 218, as some calendars refer to Eid al-Adha as being on September 23, 2015 while other calendars refer to the date as September 24, 2015.

In addition, the Committee measured the religious absenteeism of Diwali in 2015. Although Diwali fell on Veterans Day, Paramus public schools were open. Table 2 summarizes the findings.

Table 2	Diwali (Nov. 11, 2015)	<i>As stated, based on a class of twenty (20) students</i>	With an Error Factor of 100% in reported Religious Absence	<i>As stated, based on a class of twenty (20) students</i>
Religious Absence	12		24	
Total Enrollment	3,891		3,891	
Absence % - Religious	0.3%	0.06	0.6%	0.12
Absence % - Sick/Other	2.2%	0.44	3.0%	0.44
Attendance %	97.5%	19.49	96.35%	19.44
Total	100.0%	20.00	100.0%	20.00

Source: Genesis Student Information System

VIII. Staff Impact

The Committee examined staffing levels from the 2013-14, 2014-15 and year to date in 2015-16, and concluded that the District was fully staffed during the Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, and Diwali holidays.

Teaching staff attendance has been very consistent over this period with an average attendance of 96%, and a range between 93.9% and 97.9% on a monthly basis. During the examined period, four of the above-mentioned holidays fell during school days. Staffing levels ensured continuity of instruction on all of these days.

The teachers' contract provides three personal days for each employee to use for personal business. Personal business includes the observance of a religious holiday. There was a high of four personal days taken during the four holidays, or 1% of the teaching staff. Indeed, the number of teachers on conference days during these days was as high as 41, providing ample opportunity for the district to deny conference requests if substitutes are difficult to obtain on those days.

The Committee also consulted with the Board's labor attorney, who has negotiated the last contract for each of the district's four collective bargaining associations. Although some contracts delineate specific holidays, the Board does have the flexibility to alter the day the employee can take the holiday.

IX. Recommendation

As stated previously, the Committee recognizes that the demographic population in Paramus is becoming increasingly diverse and, as a way to recognize the importance and sensitivity of that diversity, we are recommending express changes within our academic framework. A summary of those recommended changes with regard to the religious holidays is as follows:

- a. It is the Committee's recommendation that the number of student and/or staff absences drives the decision to add additional school holidays to the calendar. At this time, the Committee has determined that the number of student and/or staff absences does not warrant closing school on Eid or Diwali in the 2016-17 school year. The Board will to consider including additional sources of data in the decision making process as such data is made available.¹
- b. Annually post the State of New Jersey Resolution of the list of religious holidays as determined by the State Board of Education permitting student absence from school on the school's website.
- c. Continued monitoring and reporting:
 - Further refine and develop more efficient and reliable reporting through the student information system to monitor student absences by attendance type and to analyze and understand the trends therein.
 - Review staffing reports to identify high absence days and adjust discretionary days to ensure appropriate staff coverage.
 - Report to the Trustees on the Board the results of the monitoring activities and trends referenced above.
- d. Within the school system:
 - Faculty will be strongly encouraged not to administer exams and/or quizzes or critical lesson plans on those days with student requests for religious absence.
 - The District will not schedule District or school-wide activities, e.g. back to school nights, concerts, conferences, etc. on state approved religious holidays with a history of student requests for religious absence.
 - Lessons that center on holidays and cultural diversity should, where appropriate, inform pupils of the many beliefs and customs stemming from religious, racial, ethnic and cultural heritages, including those reflective of the community's population.
 - The Administration will have ongoing discussions with the faculty to determine the appropriate level of absenteeism at which it is necessary to alter the planned lesson and introduction of new material.
- e. Amend policy 6111, School Calendar, to reflect the Committee's findings and recommendations.

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1. Report amended at the January 25, 2016 board meeting to include this sentence.