



Guidelines for Superintendents & Principals **for issues of religious observance and schools:** *from Silicon Valley Conference for Community & Justice*

- SVCCJ makes available to local schools, employers and government, The SVCCJ Calendar of Religious and Cultural Holidays and Festivals, which details most holidays and festival dates and descriptions for the major faith traditions. The calendar may be downloaded at: www.svccj.org
- An excellent brochure, Public Schools & Religious Communities; A First Amendment Guide, can be secured from: the First Amendment Center (1207 18th Ave. South, Nashville, TN 37212), the Christian Legal Society (4208 Evergreen Lane, #222, Annandale, VA 22003), or the American Jewish Congress (15 E. 84th St., NY, NY 10028).

SVCCJ offers the following guidelines for schools managing student absences for religious observance (holidays or otherwise):

(If you use these guidelines SVCCJ would appreciate the attribution. It is often most effective to use our "neutral" reputation.)

1) ***Do not force, demand or expect attendance.*** The decision about how to observe the holidays is up to each family (or in some cases each older child). So whether or not they attend religious services on that day, you cannot expect them to come to school or accord them any form of demerit for not doing so based on religion and religious practice/belief.

2) ***Be ready to accommodate any student at the standard required for the most devout, regardless of the individual's actual level of piety, which is not yours to judge.*** Confusion occurs when schools use the practices of more secular members of religious groups as a standard. The standard of accommodation has to be for the practices of the more orthodox level, even if the students don't strictly adhere to what you might expect of that group. It isn't the school's right to determine religious practices for the students or their families, and piety or observance aren't only expressed by attendance at formal services.

3) ***No homework, tests or critical work on observance days or immediately afterward.*** The students cannot be expected to do the preparatory work on these "no work" religious holidays, nor can they make it up immediately. This does not refer to longer-term assignments, however, which could have reasonably been completed before the holiday.

4) ***Provide reasonable opportunity for observant students to make up the work, in advance or afterwards, and don't make it an obstacle course to do so.*** Lesson plans are supposed to be done in advance, so there's no reason that content and assignments cannot be planned and posted early. This makes it possible for the students to do the make up work, which can be reasonably expected of them if you give them time to do so. An officious attitude throwing it all on the student's shoulders is unfair and is likely to be read as discriminatory.

5) ***Avoid field trips or other special privileged events on the holiday.*** It is unfair to deny the observant students the opportunity accorded to other students and, in fact, is abusive.

6) **Don't make the student's religion a point of discussion publicly, unless it's somehow clearly appropriate to the lesson plan for the course and is truly voluntary.** Students may be sensitive about being singled out by name and religion in front of their classmates and it isn't necessary. "Those observing the Jewish Holidays may see me privately for the assignment," is far preferable to even the best meant "Leah, you won't be doing this because of Yom Kippur." It's certainly OK to say, "Among those religious holidays we will speak about this year in World Cultures, does anyone know that tomorrow starts Ramadan?" and/or, "Is there a Muslim student who would like to explain this to the class?"

7) **Seek guidance from religious leaders or organizations for further information.** Faculty who belong to that religious group are not necessarily the best voice for the students and their families. Be very aware that religious practices vary widely within every religious group, between families and cultural groups, and even between members of the same families.

8) **Be equally aware and reasonable with your faculty and staff within the law regarding their religious holidays.** Discrimination based on religion is illegal, harmful, and creates liability and disruption for schools that do not pay attention to these legal implications.

9) **Be consistent and fair with all religious/cultural groups in accommodating their rightful religious practices; respect their right to choose their own religion.** It is illegal for a public institution to seek to proselytize or convert their beliefs and practices in any way.

10) **Do not rely on your standard North American calendars to determine the dates and times of religious holidays as observed. This is critical for scheduling realistically.**

- **The dates may vary between different denominations of the same religion.**
- **Some run for more than one day, though your calendar might not indicate this.**
- **Some run over periods not matched to the standard midnight to midnight "day".**
- **The time & date of religious holidays may vary considerably for 3 reasons:**
 - a) *many are tied to a lunar calendar, some to observance of lunar events not strictly locked to a date, or to other than the standard solar calendar in use in the US;*
 - b) *for some religions the "day" does not begin at midnight or at dawn, but at sunset the prior day and runs through the next sunset;*
 - c) *some religions determine observance dates based locally (this locale in this state in the US), while others adhere to a global or offshore observance date.*

For holidays scheduled on a lunar or mixed astronomical basis, the date will vary between years and may even be somewhat "unpredictable", because of the way in which holiday starting points are determined in accordance with religious law. While this may run counter to scientific astronomical precision, it is offensive to argue with religious authorities over what they have responsibility to determine. **Always rely most on the local religious authority for dates.**

The cooperation a school gives to its students and their families is a big determining factor of support for the needs of the school. It's a two-way street and schools should be encouraged to celebrate their local diversity. It pays big dividends and is a terrific educational device as well.

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