

“Adding Eid” Attachment: Memo from Superintendent Jeff Young

DATE: December 30, 2009

TO: School Committee Members

FROM: Jeffrey M. Young, Superintendent of Schools

SUBJECT: **Muslim Holiday** {L}{L}{L}{L} {SEP} {SEP}

In the days following the December 15, 2009 School Committee meeting at which the possibility of adding a Muslim holiday to the Cambridge Public Schools annual calendar was raised, I have consulted a number of groups and individuals regarding this issue. At this time, I am recommending that the School Committee adopt the motion that was placed before you at the last meeting (see attachment) and add one Muslim holiday to the annual school calendar.

On December 22, 2009 I met with a group composed of current CRLS students; several CRLS graduates, including Samuel Gebru who spoke at the 12/15/09 meeting; Marla Erlie from the Cambridge Human Rights Commission; and several members of the CRLS faculty. At this 90-minute meeting, the group spoke to me about the significance of Eid, including its relevance to practicing Muslims as well as the ways in which the Muslim community contributes to the school's diversity. We also talked at length about programs and policies to raise awareness among non-Muslims about the Muslims' positive contributions to the school in particular and society in general. We had an in-depth discussion about cultural issues such as perceived intolerance of or taboos associated with Muslims at CRLS. The group informed me of several efforts underway at the school to raise consciousness. I told the group of 15-20 individuals that I am committed to continuing to work with them to improve the climate at CRLS, whether or not a formal day off was added to the annual school calendar.

All of the students--especially their main spokesperson, Hichem Hadjeres--appreciate the efforts of CRLS administrators to promote understanding among different cultures (and I must tell you that based on what I've seen in other high schools, CRLS does an excellent job of advancing its ideals of a diverse community). For additional background, I am attaching to this memo a recent email on the subject from Dr. Chris Saheed.

I also have spoken with Diana Eck, the Executive Director of the Harvard Pluralism Project as well as Dr. Ali Asani, Professor of Indo-Muslim and Islamic Religion and Cultures at Harvard. Both Dr. Eck and Dr. Asani offered advice on developing a more inclusive culture at CRLS. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are the three major religions in the United States. Dr. Eck contends that the “slippery slope” argument that there might be no end to future holiday requests does not really pertain to this matter, as other religions do not have the major single Holy Day on the same order of Rosh Hashana/Yom Kippur, Good Friday, and Eid. Dr. Asani pointed out the growing sense of “Islam-phobia” in our country and the world and thought it was important for public institutions to do whatever we could to advance the goals of understanding and acceptance. Moreover, it does not seem fair and equitable that Jews and Christians are able to worship and still have the opportunity to attend the full 180

days of school while Muslims who wish to worship have, at best, the opportunity to attend 179 days of school.

There are implementation challenges, however. At the School Committee's request, we consulted with Ellen Semonoff to assess the impact adding a holiday to the school calendar would have upon City services. For your information, Ellen's memo to Jim Maloney is attached. We will also need to go back to the table with our unions in a collective bargaining environment to make sure that all employees understand the impact of this policy.

At every public meeting I have attended since I arrived in Cambridge, I have spoken about my commitment to the values of academic excellence and social justice. These are easy to talk about and not so easy to live out in real life. The present case regarding the school calendar offers an opportunity for us to live up to our values. Thus, I recommend that Eid be added to the school calendar and that we work hard to ensure that the administrative inconveniences and challenges attendant upon this decision be worked out in a timely and thoughtful manner. Cambridge has an opportunity to be a leader and I believe we should embrace this moment in time. There is no question that the world is becoming more pluralistic and we should use this occasion to take concrete action to promote the spirit of pluralism, inclusion and social justice.

NOTE: Next week, when people return from vacation, we will send you supplemental information, including a new copy of the school calendar as well as a list of Important Dates for the School Year.

I hope that the School Committee will approve the proposed CPS calendar at the January 5, 2010 meeting.

JMY/mlw