The Pluralism Project

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Adding Eid (A)

At the December 15, 2009 meeting of the Cambridge Public School Committee, Superintendent Jeff Young received a formal request to add a Muslim holiday to the school calendar. The motion from two School Committee members read, in part: "…[G]iven that other large world religions are recognized by the Cambridge Public Schools by closing school on specific holidays, the School Committee asks the Superintendent to add the Muslim holidays of either Eid al-Fitr or Eid al-Adha to the school calendar depending on which holiday falls during a given school year."[1] Young considered the calendar to be the bedrock of school organization: it was already behind schedule, and debate on this issue would only cause further delay.

Young explained, "It was hard, because on one hand I wanted to make it go away."[2] Yet he also thought, "Here's a really interesting social justice question." The issue touched on his fundamental belief in equality: it was, for Young, a question of basic fairness. In the current calendar, school was closed for Good Friday and either Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashanah. Effectively, Young noted, Jews and Christians could observe their holidays and still have 180 days of school, while Muslims would have, at most, 179. Yet there were several compelling practical, financial, and educational reasons not to make the calendar change. Sensitive to its potential for controversy and wanting to study the issue more closely, Young asked if he could take some additional time and offer a memo for the January 5, 2010 meeting. The incoming school committee -- recently elected and beginning service in January -- would then be able vote on it and "own" the decision.

Young had been in Cambridge only six months but served as superintendent for three districts over an accomplished twenty-one years. He thought, "I'm trying to choose my battles in this job. Is this the one that I really want to pick?" Young's memo making a recommendation would be due in two weeks.

The Superintendent and the City

Young has the demeanor of a professor: the former English teacher speaks intentionally, in a low, gravelly voice. As a superintendent, he serves as the chief executive of the school committee, composed of the mayor and six other elected officials, and as the leader of the staff, including teachers, administrators, aides, support staff, and custodians. Young explained, "the unexpected issues, that seem small, sometimes just explode and end up taking up unbelievable amounts of time and energy to resolve -- to the point where you can't ever get back to the most important things."

Young's office, situated in an old brick building in need of repair, has the functional décor of a school system with a limited budget. After eleven years in the affluent Boston suburb of Newton, Young explained, "what made me want to come to Cambridge was my sense that this could be the place that really becomes the model of excellence in urban education." Young felt the community's values were consonant with his own: in Cambridge, academic excellence and social justice were not seen as competing interests, but complementary. Young explained, "When it comes to academic excellence and social justice, you simply can't stake claim to one without the other." Young had taken a pay cut to come to Cambridge and was eager to get to work. The performance gap between white students and African American students in Cambridge had become, in his estimation, "a moral issue."

Cambridge is unique both structurally and demographically: eleven K-8 schools and one K-6 school, operating on a controlled choice magnet program, all feed into a large high school with nearly 1,600 students. The public school population is one-third white, one-third African American, and one-third other ethnic groups, including Haitian, Dominican, Ethiopian, and Somali students. There is also considerable socioeconomic diversity: 45 percent of Cambridge public school students are on free or reduced lunch; many children of Harvard and MIT professors also attend the public schools. Yet there was much work to be done in Cambridge: "The community wants itself to be, and is in many ways, a very welcoming place that is highly tolerant and understanding, and appreciative of differences, whether it is racial or ethnic or socioeconomic. And at the same time, the schools have not delivered on their promise, I think, as fully as we can."

Just a few years prior, Cambridge was on the state's watch list of failing schools. While Young's predecessor raised test scores, he often struggled to keep his position: parents, staff, and some school committee members criticized his leadership style. *The Boston Globe* reported that Cambridge's mayor characterized the prior superintendent as a "tyrant."[3] The search for a new superintendent, like many, was a long, drawn out, politicized process. Local media described the divisive final days of the selection, which drew angry crowds to community meetings: "One finalist is a hometown educator, the other an outsider from the suburbs. One is black, the other white. Both come with strong references and passionate followings that have split this city down the middle."[4] Young noted that his selection was charged, both politically and racially: "This was the backdrop: 'What does this guy know about the achievement gap, the education of people of color?'"

Young knew he had something to prove, but just wanted to get to work. The new position would challenge him to promote equal access to a quality education in a complex and politically charged urban school system -- all at a time of budget cutbacks, in the midst of a recession.

Studying the Issue

As Young sat down to study the question of adding a Muslim holiday, he found that there was no policy in place about adding religious holidays to the school calendar. The last religious holidays were added decades ago: one Christian holiday, Good Friday; and one Jewish holiday, either Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashanah, depending on the day on which it occurred. He learned that the rationale for adding these holidays had more to do with staff than students: earlier decisions were based on the number of teachers who were absent. "It was like a restaurant: we were short-staffed," Young explained. He didn't have data on the number of Muslim teachers, but he was aware that the numbers weren't generating enough absences to justify adding Eid.

Similarly, there was no data available on the religious affiliations of students. Even if he had the data, Young thought, "Who gets to decide that you need ten percent or five percent or twenty percent to reach the threshold of earning a holiday? How do you make a decision like that?" Without a policy, without data, Young wondered how to make a decision.

Young researched the issue in other school districts. In Florida, the question of adding a Muslim holiday briefly resulted in all religious holidays being removed from the calendar, which led to outrage and threats against the Muslim community and the school committee.[5] Observers of the controversy were surprised that the question of school holidays could generate so much anger, and that the story made national news. When Bill O'Reilly covered the controversy on *Fox News*, he commented that the request for a Muslim holiday was "absurd in a Judeo-Christian country."[6]

Yet in some districts, there seemed to be no choice but to change the calendar. In Dearborn, Michigan, absences were so high on Muslim holidays that the school district risked losing federal funding.[7] In the State of New Jersey, more than one hundred holidays are listed on the list of optional religious absences, from the Sikh festival of Baisakhi to the Buddha's Birthday; from the Zoroastrian festival of Narouz to the Hindu observance of Navaratri.[8] Some districts, overwhelmed by the number of observances, consider dropping all religious holidays, or establishing one "World Religions Day."

Young knew that other diverse urban school districts were also struggling with this question. In New York City, where estimates indicate that 10 percent of the student population is Muslim, grassroots groups have been working to add the Eids to the school calendar: this was motivated, in part, after the New York Regents exam was scheduled on Eid al-Adha in 2006.[9] In 2009, the New York City Council voted to close schools for Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr; however, Mayor Michael Bloomberg opposed the change, stating: "One of the problems you have with a diverse city is if you close the schools for every single holiday, there won't be any school."[10] Young wondered: if Cambridge said yes to one religious group, "How do you ever say no?" He asked himself, "Would this be a slippery slope?"

The Question of a Holiday

Early in Young's tenure as a new superintendent, he heard about a student request to add a holiday to the school calendar. "I had so much on my plate, the calendar was low on my list; I sort of lost track of it." In the weeks before the December 15 meeting, Young asked Dr. Chris Saheed, principal of the city's large public high school, Cambridge Rindge and Latin, to bring him up to date on the issue. Saheed wrote, "Several years ago, the Cambridge Human Rights Commission (CHRC) held a forum at which time some Muslim students expressed concern about their full inclusion into the school community." After this meeting, Saheed consulted with members of the CHRC and an Arab Anti-Discrimination group and held open meetings with students and staff. Saheed's email continued, "A lot of wonderful things happened," including an assembly about Islam around the world; a new club for Muslim students and allies; and a "Quiet Activity Space" established for students to reflect or pray.

Saheed wrote: "…several Muslim students went to the School Committee to present a case for establishing a day off on the school calendar. My understanding of what happened (I was not there) is that the members listened, but the then-Super did not appear to take the request seriously (according to the students). Nothing happened as a result." He added that last year, students invited School Committee Member Mark McGovern to a meeting to discuss the issue again. Saheed wrote, "Students mentioned that there is a day for other faiths and that their sense is that the numbers of Muslim students in the district is at par with the numbers of others (either students or, in the case of the Jewish holiday, staff) that warrant such a change in the calendar." In closing, Saheed added, "You should know that we do make the legal accommodations for Muslim students who are absent on their religious holidays, but some Muslim students feel this is still unequal."[11]

A Meeting at the High School

Since the discussion of a Muslim holiday arose in the political context of a school committee meeting, Young was not particularly interested in the religious content of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, but in how the holidays were important to others. On December 22, Young visited the high school to meet with the grassroots group that had formed to advance the cause of adding a Muslim holiday. The group included students, most of whom were Muslim, and a few teachers; it also included a vocal member of Cambridge's Human Rights Commission

and two recent graduates of the high school. Current students and teachers described the many ways in which the high school environment had improved and the accommodations now in place, but they also described feeling "invisible," as if they couldn't show their religion. For the first time at a public meeting, Young mentioned his own faith: "I am Jewish. And I don't ever lead with that. That's not my main identifier, my self-identification." He followed this with a question for the students, "Do you feel you need to lead with this, with your religion, in order to be integrated or respected?" Was this, he wondered, an identity issue?

Overall, Young was impressed by the students and faculty, and felt encouraged by the ways they were working to create greater understanding. One junior at the high school, Hichem Hadjeres, was particularly impressive. Hadjeres, born in Algeria, noted that the climate had improved during the eleven years he had been enrolled in Cambridge Public Schools: "I pray regularly in school."[12] If a holiday fell on a school day, he would miss school so he could go to the local mosque, offer prayers, and visit family and friends. He would simply explain to non-Mulism friends, "We celebrate Eid al-Fitr to mark the ending of Ramadan, and we celebrate Eid al-Adha in order to commemorate the sacrifice of Prophet Abraham, as well as the conclusion of Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca)."[13] Hadjeres didn't feel there was any real opposition to adding the holiday, but understood it might take some time for the change to be made. Young felt that some of those leading the charge were recent graduates, rather than current students. He heard that, for these young people, this was a first foray into the political world. "The sense of urgency was less palpable among the current students." After an hour and a half of conversation, Young told the group he wasn't sure what would happen with the holiday; however, he was committed to continuing the dialogue.

A Controversy in Newton

As Young considered his options, he reflected on how a decision can have serious, and unintended, consequences. In Newton, back in 2000, he received a call from an elementary school principal: cameras and reporters from local and national media outlets were gathering in front of the school. Earlier that day, a first-grade teacher had mentioned his male partner during a class project on autobiographies. When parents heard this, some contacted reporters, concerned that the school was promoting homosexuality. Young instructed the media to get away from the school immediately and asked them to come to his office for a press conference. As he stood in front of the cameras and microphones, without prepared remarks, reporters asked: "What are you going to do about this?" Young recalled his reply: "Any teacher has a right to be who he or she is. Any teacher, whether gay or heterosexual, who spoke about the intimate details of their sex life, that would be inappropriate. That is not what happened here." His message was clear: "There is no double standard in Newton."

As the words came out of his mouth, he knew this response was right and equitable. He also knew his decision wouldn't be popular. "I accept the fact that not everyone is going to love me; I get enough love from my family." Yet, that split-second decision would become "an albatross": it had a negative impact on his ability to work with parts of the community. Media reports referred to him as the superintendent with a "gay agenda." It was tough on his family, who lived and went to public schools in Newton. "There was a huge backlash." Young recalled that the lowest moment was when flipping channels on TV with his son and hearing his name mentioned on a cable access show. They paused to listen, only to hear a new epithet used to describe him. His young son asked, "Dad, what's a 'pedophile'?"

Looking back, Young had no regrets: he was proud of his stand. "I had a little bit of battle testing," he recalled. "It cuts both ways. On the one hand I didn't want to go through that again, but on the other hand it was the right thing to do."

Seeking Counsel

Since the decision needed to be made in the last two weeks of December, Young felt relatively isolated. Many colleagues and staff were not in the office due to the winter holiday break. Much of his research on the issue took place at home, where his young adult children and their friends gathered. When they heard about the decision before him, they readily offered their opinion: if other religious communities had a day off, he should add the Muslim holiday, out of fairness. Young contacted his friend Tom Scott, who heads up the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, to ask if any other districts in the state were looking to add a Muslim holiday. He remembered Scott's laughing reply: "Only in Cambridge!"

Yet, Young thought, Cambridge did offer something not every district can access: top-tier educational institutions. "I need to talk to people who are smart about these issues." He contacted a scholar of religious diversity and spoke with a scholar-practitioner of Islam. It was important for Young to be able to discuss the issue with people who didn't have a direct stake in the outcome. While both scholars understood how difficult the decision was, they also saw the merits in recognizing Eid as a school holiday. After the conversations, Young was less concerned about the "slippery slope" argument, and more concerned about growing Islamophobia. Perhaps public institutions could play an important role in advancing understanding and acceptance. Given that Islam is now one of the three major religions in the U.S., is it fair to recognize only two in the school calendar?

The Impact of Adding a Holiday

As Young thought about adding Eid to the calendar, he considered the many arguments against it: practical, financial, educational, and political. Adding Eid would be a significant impact to the budget, as custodians, support staff and others would receive another paid holiday. He thought, "How can you really rationalize spending thousands of dollars to pay people to stay home when we can't hire enough teachers to keep class sizes reasonable?" Moreover, every educator knows that in June, at the end of the school year, in buildings without air conditioning, they could not provide the same quality of instruction. Practically speaking, the first week of school for September 2010 posed a particular challenge: Monday was the Labor Day holiday; Tuesday and Wednesday were regular school days; Thursday was the Rosh Hashanah holiday; and Friday was Eid. If Eid became a school holiday, the first week of school would be two days long. "It's not exactly the way to get some traction at the beginning of the school year."

Politically, he wondered, "What would it mean, in this post-9/11 world, to add a Muslim holiday?" Given the current climate, he was afraid that Muslim students and teachers might face stigma or hostility if the decision about the calendar was poorly received. Both Young and the school committee were likely to face backlash, especially if the issue made its way to the national media. How much political capital was he willing to expend on this issue? "For a superintendent, political capital is like a bank account that you spend down until the school committee fires you." But, he recalled, "There was also a personal risk: How can you go around making speeches on academic excellence and social justice, and the first time you're confronted with it, not follow through?"

A Memo Drafted

On December 29, Young drafted a memo to the school committee. The process had been valuable: he had a better sense of the challenges faced by Muslim students and had considered the issue closely. Young was clear that the most important thing, beyond any holiday, was that students were safe and respected for 180 days a year. Both Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr would be added to the list of important days in order to recognize the significance of the holidays and to ensure that no important tests or assignments would be given on those days. Students would have an excused absence on those days, but school would not be closed. He reviewed the draft with colleagues, who indicated that it satisfied the issue. In this instance, he thought, maybe "OK" would have to suffice. Yet, at the end of the day, Young asked his assistant to hold the memo: he needed to sleep on it. While he was not generally prone to indecision, as Young drove home on a cold December evening, he felt far from resolved.

Endnotes

[1] Joint Motion from the School Committee to the Superintendent (C09-569), regarding the addition of Muslim holiday to the school calendar, December 15, 2009, from Jeff Young.

[2] All quotes from Jeff Young: Jeff Young, interview by author, Cambridge, MA, January 14, 2010 and February 12, 2010.

[3] Christina Silva, "Cambridge schools chief vows to lighten up," *The Boston Globe*, July 14, 2006, http://www.boston.com/news/education/k_12/articles/2006/07/14/cambridge_schools_chief_vows_to_lighten_up/, accessed February 2010.

[4] Meghan Irons, "Superintendent rivalry creates rift in Cambridge," *The Boston Globe*, April 7, 2009, http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2009/04/07/superintendent_rivalry_creates_rift_in_cambridge/, accessed February 2010.

[5] "Holy War Over Vacation," November 9, 2005, webcast, *CBS News*, http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=1032221n, accessed February 2010.

[6] "O'Reilly: closing public schools for Muslim holiday 'absurd in Judeo-Christian country,'" (*Fox News*, O'Reilly Factor, originally aired October 27, 2005), available from MediaMatters, http://mediamatters.org/mmtv/200510280006, accessed February 2010.

[7] "Dearborn school district may lose funding over absences on Eid-ul-Adha," *Lansing State Journal*, January 7, 2006, http://pluralism.org/news/view/12383, accessed February 2010.

[8] "2009-2010 List of Religious Holidays Permitting Pupil Absence," State of New Jersey Department of Education Web site, http://www.state.nj.us/education/genfo/holidays0910.htm, accessed February 2010.

[9] Omar Sacirbey, "Muslims press public schools for Islamic holidays," *Religion News Service*, August 12, 2009, http://www.religionnews.com/index.php?/rnstext/muslims_press_schools_on_islamic_holidays/ , accessed February 2010.

[10] "City Council Wants Muslim Holidays Added to School Calendar," *WNYC*, June 30, 2009, http://www.wnyc.org/news/articles/135556, accessed February 2010.

[11] Chris Saheed to Jeff Young, email regarding recognition of Muslim holidays, on December 3, 2009, from Jeff Young.

[12] Hichem Hadjeres, interview by author, Cambridge, MA, April 3, 2010.

[13] Ibid.