

Adding Eid (B)

As Superintendent Jeff Young re-read his draft memo about adding a Muslim holiday, he wondered if he was evading the hard topic before him. At home that evening, he thought about the many occasions on which he had spoken about academic excellence and social justice: “How did this memo address that?”¹ He was concerned that students should be safe and respected 180 days a year, and not just given a holiday. Young asked himself, “How can we capture not just the *fact* that the world is more diverse, but the *spirit* of that?” He recalled, “The skies opened a little bit, and I saw in that moment an opportunity. ‘If Cambridge has an opportunity to be a trailblazer and a leader in an area of social justice, that in a practical sense sends a message of equity, how can I talk myself out of it?’ And in the end, I couldn’t.”

Driving into his office the next day, Young felt uplifted. He would write a new memo recommending that the holiday be added. He thought, “You have to do what you believe. You have to model courage.” Young drafted a second, and final, memo on December 30, 2009. His recommendation read, in part:

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.²

On January 5, 2010, the School Committee voted unanimously to approve the holiday. They directed the Superintendent to “immediately begin discussion with all collective bargaining units regarding the addition of one of the Eid holidays to the 2010 school calendar and beyond, in recognition of our growing Muslim student and staff populations.”³ Current and former Cambridge Rindge and Latin School (CRLS) students were among those present for the vote, including Humbi Song, a CRLS graduate who had started the high school group to recognize Eid. During public comment, Song stated that the decision was particularly notable “in a nation where bias against Muslims is so pervasive.”⁴

Young would now turn his attention to minimizing the negative educational and financial impact of an additional holiday: he would need to identify an existing holiday that could be removed from the calendar and engage in negotiations with the unions to approve the changes. In the meantime, the Eid holidays were added to Cambridge’s list of Important Dates/Holidays⁵; and in future years, depending on when the holidays occurred, Eid al-Fitr would take precedence; a similar arrangement was already in place for the Jewish holidays, with Rosh Hashanah taking precedence over Yom Kippur for a day off. After the vote, Young was confident that the changes would soon be formalized, yet he also was sure that the discussion over adding Eid was far from over.

In Cambridge and Beyond

In Cambridge, Young recalled, there was little immediate response to the decision to add Eid to the holiday calendar. He recalled, “People sort of took it in stride. It just kind of made sense.” Young found it helpful to explain that, with three major religions, the calendar change would mean that each would have one day off. “It de-politicized it.” He emphasized that this was not a matter of “doing a favor” or “dispensing this ‘golden dust.’” Young understood the addition of the holiday as similar to his plan to restructure the middle grades in Cambridge to close the achievement gap: for him, both were issues of “fairness and justice.” While his proposal to restructure the middle grades—and bring together students from higher-income, higher-performing schools with a more diverse group of students—was met with what he described as “relentless” local opposition, adding Eid was “barely on the radar.”

Yet beyond Cambridge, in the blogosphere, Young faced harsh criticism for adding a Muslim holiday to the school calendar. He remembered, “That was pretty wicked, nasty. The name-calling, all the bias and hatred, came out.” Some of the negativity was directed squarely at him:

Is there someone in Mass. who does not understand that the Muslims (proudly) killed several thousand Americans on 9/11 and MANY more before and after that attack? Hello Cambridge School Super - are you blind, deaf, and really dumb? Or are you Muslim?

Jeffrey Young: Wake up and see the well-deserved hatred and disgust for [M]uslims in this country. Be more sensitive to your support for our devout enemies (Muslims) and more sensitive to this country. If you dislike the USA, by all means, LEAVE IT !!!!!.... I challenge you to stop the Muslim holidays or simply grow up and [accept] that they are not wanted by the people of the USA.⁶

Young explained that, had this happened twenty years ago, “I would have crawled under a blanket.” As a superintendent, he has become accustomed to criticism. He joked, “Not everyone is going to like me as much as my mother.” As a public figure, he described going through the stages: first, taking criticism personally; later, developing a thick skin; and now, “letting it go.” What troubled him more were the comments denigrating Muslims and Islam. “I was a little surprised by the hostility that came on those blogs. That caught me a little off guard. I didn’t think people would care that much. But it showed me just how deep the fear runs in people.”

When Young received an invitation to discuss the calendar change on the *Bill O’Reilly Show*, his first response was: “Oh yeah, I’m up for a good fight. I could enjoy this.” A close friend advised him against it, for which Young is now relieved. Young described it as an important lesson: “...to recognize the bait before you take it.” At the time, a number of other national controversies were playing out about Islam in America, such as the proposed Qur’an burning and the “Ground Zero Mosque” dispute. Young reflected: “That sort of affirmed the goodness of the decision that we made here. ... Because there is so much fear, so much fear. To me, hatred grows out of fear.” Young explained that what helps reduce fear is trust. “It’s more a matter of trying to build a sense of trust in the community, that we *all* have equal access.”

Making the Change

Before the calendar could be formally changed, Young and the other members of the school committee had to identify an existing holiday that could be removed from the school calendar. Although one committee member

had suggested Columbus Day—which many in Cambridge would rather protest than celebrate—Young would not consider removing federal or religious holidays from the calendar. Perhaps, he thought, they could trade Eid for a day off in March, known as “Evacuation Day.” Few school districts still celebrated the holiday, which recognizes the evacuation of British troops in the Revolutionary War. Young understood that this change might not be welcome: the Evacuation Day holiday coincides with St. Patrick’s Day and was a long-standing tradition. The change required lengthy negotiations with the unions but was ultimately approved. Yet establishing the date of the holiday would represent another hurdle: how, Young wondered, would they set the date for a holiday that relies on the sighting of the moon? He explained, “When it comes to school calendars, there’s no room for any ambiguity.” Young added: “It goes on refrigerators.” He understood that establishing the date involved questions of religious interpretation and authority: before putting it on the calendar, he would speak with members of the Muslim community and consult with school district representatives in Burlington, Vermont where Eid had recently been added to the calendar.

At Cambridge City Hall in September 2010, the new holiday was formally announced: Eid-al Adha would be a school holiday for the first time on November 7, 2011. The announcement, made before 150 invited guests including the school committee, elected officials, and members of the Muslim community, was warmly received. Shortly after the announcement, Young reflected, “I hope and believe that the Muslim students here will feel some real respect coming from their city, and from their community, as a result of it.” As a superintendent with more than two decades of experience, he had been called upon to deal with everything from the mundane to the tragic: Would there be a snow day? How do you tell parents about the death of their children in a bus accident? Young explained that while the addition of a Muslim holiday was not a major issue, it was still important: “It is small in that it is one day in a school calendar, in a literal sense. But it is big in that it is expressive of values.”

After Eid

When the new holiday was first observed in the Cambridge Public Schools, Young remembered, “It all went smoothly... no problems, no complaints.” Media coverage of the holiday was minimal, and mild; while the initial decision in 2010 resulted in significant backlash and national attention, the observance itself in 2011 generated little coverage. Aside from a single press release issued by the Universal Society of Hinduism asking that Diwali be added as a school holiday, the “slippery slope” of additional requests for holidays had not materialized. Yet less than six months after Eid was observed, Young received a letter from the Wisconsin-based Freedom From Religion Foundation, asking that the Cambridge Public Schools “...reconsider its policy of closing for the religious holidays of Good Friday, Rosh Hashanah, and Eid al-Fitr/Eid al-Adha.”⁷ The letter argued that closing schools for religious holidays “...violates the Establishment Clause of the U.S. Constitution.” It continued:

Unlike civil holidays such as Thanksgiving, the Eid, Good Friday, and Rosh Hashanah holidays do not have any “secular rituals” and act only as days of “solemn religious observance.” ... Thus, individuals such as atheists, Buddhists, or Unitarians are alienated by the adoption of these strictly sectarian holidays, which conflicts with the Committee’s inclusionary purpose. Indeed by only giving the “large world religions” days off the Committee is exacerbating the marginalization of other minority religions.⁸

A second letter, dated June 28, 2012, reaffirmed the “constitutional principle of separation of church and state”⁹ and asked for a written response to their concerns. As of fall 2012, the Cambridge Public Schools had

not issued a formal reply. Now, nearly three years after the initial request for a Muslim holiday, Jeff Young had to once again consider how to respond.

Endnotes

¹ All quotes from Jeff Young: Jeff Young, interview by author, Cambridge, MA, January 14, 2010 and February 12, 2010.

² Jeffrey Young to School Committee Members, memorandum regarding Muslim holiday, December 30, 2009, Cambridge Public Schools, from Jeff Young.

³ School Committee to Jeff Young, memorandum regarding Muslim holiday, January 5, 2010, Cambridge Public Schools, from Jeff Young.

⁴ Marc Levy, "School Committee spars on way to Muslim holiday, salary votes," *Cambridge Day*, January 5, 2010, <http://www.cambridgeday.com/2010/01/05/school-committee-spars-on-way-to-muslim-holiday-salary-votes/>, accessed April 2010.

⁵ School Committee to Jeff Young, memorandum regarding Muslim holiday, January 5, 2010, Cambridge Public Schools, from Jeff Young.

⁶ [name removed], "Is there someone..." October 10, 2010, comment on Darla Dawald's post, "Ummm EXCUSE ME?? Mass.school district to observe Muslim Holiday each year starting next year..." October 11, 2010, on blog "Patriot Action Network," <http://www.patriotactionnetwork.com/forum/topics/ummm-excuse-me-mass-school?commentId=2600775%3AComment%3A2827501>, accessed March 2011.

⁷ Annie Laurie Gaylor to Jeffrey Young and Members of the Cambridge School Committee, Freedom From Religion Foundation letter regarding school closings for sectarian religious holidays, April 4, 2012, from Jeff Young.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Annie Laurie Gaylor to Jeffrey Young, Freedom From Religion Foundation letter regarding school closings for sectarian religious holidays, June 28, 2012, from Jeff Young.