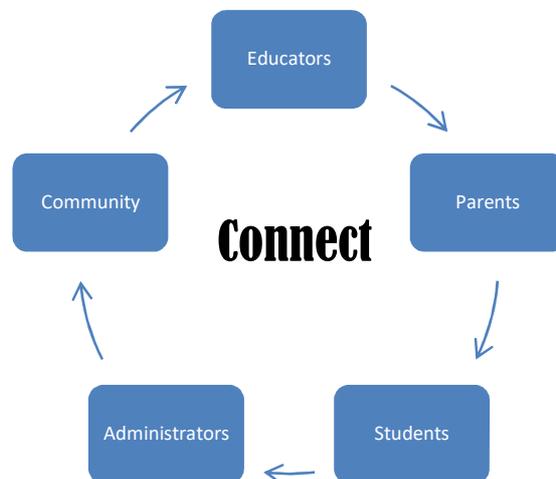


# *An Educator's Guide to Increase Religious and Cultural Awareness*

*Empowering our educators and parents with correct information to increase religious, cultural  
and racial tolerance in our schools and communities*



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With the contemporary world on its way to becoming globalized, it is inevitable that we will be living in an increasingly multi-cultural and multi-faith society. The challenge is: “how can we live with each other while upholding respect and being respected at the same time”.

We believe that it is essential that the youth, as well as parents and educators of our generation acquire a broad spectrum of knowledge that includes religious and cultural information about their neighbors so that they can broaden their minds and their understanding as well as develop their lateral thinking abilities and skills.

Within our schools we find people of all cultures and faiths, coming together representing the environment that our youth will have to face when they grow up. It is important that they not only understand the diversity that exists but they also respect that diversity and learn how to understand and live in harmony with people of other faiths, cultures, and ethnicities.

With this in mind, it is essential that our parents and educators seek to gain some awareness of cultural and religious sensitivities amongst their students, so that there is reciprocity of respect and understanding from both sides, so as to ultimately provide the best education for our youth here in Washington County. It is essential that educators and parents help to broaden the minds of our youth. In order for educators and parents to facilitate this crucial part of their education, they themselves must be aware of the cultural and religious sensitivities that are joined with diversity.

Many of the daily rituals and beliefs that Muslims practice in their daily lives are protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution, which protects the free exercise of religion. Moreover, the Equal Access Act of 1984 affirmed the right of student-initiated religious activities in public schools. Although Islamic religious practices have similarities to elements of other religions, the details of time and procedure that define what is proper religious practice may differ.

A simple example of cultural nuance that can only be appreciated through increased awareness can be seen through something as simple as eye contact. Maintaining eye contact when talking might make some Muslims and the elderly uncomfortable. Many Muslim children are taught not to stare into the eyes of elders, or authority figures, as it is considered disrespectful or challenging. In Western cultures, not maintaining eye contact, may be erroneously interpreted as a sign of guilt or disrespect.

As in other conservative faiths profanity and sexual innuendos are also considered inappropriate in all settings.

One of our goals is to raise awareness about Islam and Muslims so as to encourage religious understanding and harmony amongst all citizens in Washington County and decrease religious, cultural and racial intolerance.

Some of the topics addressed herein:

- Dietary requirements for Muslims
- Clothing and Appearance
- Gender Relations
- Physical Education
- Religious Holidays
- Fasting
- Curriculum Issues
- Music
- School Dances
- Daily Prayer
- Friday Prayer
- Prayer space and time

## **Dietary Requirements**

The religion of Islam prohibits the consumption of intoxicants, pork and any pork by-products. Therefore, practicing Muslims are careful about the food they consume and how it is prepared. Muslims follow certain standards called 'Halaal' (permissible by Islamic Law) in slaughtering and preparation of meat and poultry, similar to 'Kosher' meats and products within the Jewish faith. Some objectionable foods:

\*Pepperoni, sausage, and hot dogs containing pork

\*Bacon either alone or in soups or foods

\*Animal shortening

\*Gelatin

\*Lard

\*Food ingredients containing alcohol

Food items containing such ingredients could be highlighted clearly either with a mark, sticker or symbol so that even the youngest of students can identify them easily.

Muslims may find it offensive to have pork and intoxicants at table while eating lunch or dinner.

## **Clothing and Appearance**

Islam prescribes that both men and women behave and dress modestly. Muslims believe that an emphasis on modesty encourages society to value individuals for their knowledge, wisdom, skills and contribution to the community, rather than for physical attractiveness. There are a number of ways in which Muslims express such teachings.

Men and boys' bodies should always be covered and they should never expose the area between their knees and navel. They should also wear clothing that is loose and does not show the shape or form of their body parts.

When in public around non-related men, women wear loose fitting, non-revealing clothing, and a head covering called 'hijab' or 'niqab' or 'khimar'. The covering of the head can be found in other faiths such as Judaism and Christianity and is comparable to the Catholic 'Habit.' This head covering may lead to teasing and negative comments or even pulling off of the head scarf. Parents and educators may prevent other classmates from teasing and pulling off a Muslim girl's head scarf.

## **Gender Relations**

During their lifetime, children will inevitably interact with people of both sexes. Children need to be educated and taught about how to respect the opposite gender. Once Muslim children reach the age of puberty, there are certain parameters for relations between the sexes. For example, many Muslims are reluctant to shake hands with the opposite gender, even with teachers and administrators. This should not be taken as an insult, but as a sign of personal modesty and respect.

## **Physical Education**

Muslims may raise religious objections to co-ed physical education classes such as swimming. Students should not be pressured to participate or be penalized for not taking part in such activities. Furthermore, boys and girls may not take same-sex communal after-sport showers together. Private showers should be made available, or gym classes could be scheduled towards the end of the day, allowing the student to shower at home. Muslim students should not be forced to participate in co-ed swimming classes.

## **Religious Holidays**

There are several days in the Islamic calendar (Lunar Calendar) with special religious significance, but the major celebrations common to all Muslims are the two Eid (holiday) days. The first Eid is celebrated on the day after the month of Ramadan (month of fasting). The second is celebrated on the tenth day of the twelfth Islamic month (Dhul Hijjah).

The festivities include congregational prayer, gatherings with family and friends, and gifts and entertainment. A typical greeting on these occasions is 'Eid Mubarak' or 'Blessed Eid'. To accommodate the needs of students during these observances, schools should add Muslim holidays to their calendars and excuse students from attending school on those days.

The lunar calendar differs from the Gregorian Calendar by approximately 10-12 days per year. This means that Muslim holidays fall on different Gregorian dates each year. The Muslim holidays depend on the sighting of the new moon, sometimes the exact date can only be determined with certainty the night before. Muslim communities in America would like to see that Eid receives recognition similar to that given to Christmas and Hanukkah.

## **Fasting**

The month of Ramadan is a holy time of the year and is when the Muslims are required to fast. When Muslims fast they refrain from eating and drinking from break of dawn until sunset. The dates of this fast change each year. Ramadan is a period of self-restraint and discipline and a time to focus on moral conduct. It is also a time to empathize with those who are less fortunate and appreciate what one has. Fasting is prescribed when children reach the age of puberty. Still, some Muslim families encourage and allow their young children to experiment with fasting. Fasting students should be allowed to go to the school library instead of cafeteria during lunch. Also, they should be excused from strenuous physical activity during the fast.

To turn the diversity in the classroom to educational advantage, a teacher may invite a Muslim student or guest speaker to explain the practices and traditions surrounding the Ramadan fast. This may help the Muslim student avoid a feeling of awkwardness about not having lunch with his or her fellow students during the month. By providing opportunities for students of varied religious backgrounds to share their special occasions, the school helps to support parents and communities in their efforts to teach beneficial values.

## **Curriculum Issues**

Many Muslims feel their faith has been treated with bias in textbooks and school programs. Although availability of more accurate and balanced instructional material is increasing, the continued use of outdated material in social studies and world history classes reinforces perceptions of Islam as a “foreign” belief and creed, and Muslims as enemies.

Such divisiveness has contributed to incidents of harassment, violence, and bullying against Muslim children by their classmates. In many cases Muslim children have been mocked as ‘devil worshippers’, ‘sand n\*ggers’, and ‘camel jockeys’. Schools and school boards may want to review policies and programs in light of the increasing Muslim population in the public school system. Textbooks that contribute to religious prejudice are not suitable for educating students. Books that lack reliable information are usually replete with mistakes about the basic Islamic beliefs. Qualified Muslim educators should participate in the textbook selection process, particularly for history, social studies and geography.

### **Sex education**

Family life and sex education material presented in schools is another sensitive matter to Muslims. In Islam individuals become religiously responsible for their deeds when they reach puberty. Islam puts great emphasis on modesty, chastity and morality and there is a specific set of teachings with regard to human development and its related issues. Close contact with the local Islamic centers is essential to encourage input from the Muslim community. Class materials should be available for review and parents should have the option to remove their children from all or part of the program.

## **Music & Dances**

Many Muslims view that listening to music and playing musical instruments is prohibited in Islam. Therefore, another alternative should be provided for Muslim students. Similarly, school dances are viewed to be prohibited in Islam solely because of the Music and possible intimate contact with the opposite gender. School dances can be a particularly challenging time for Muslim students because many are torn between socializing and being accepted amongst their friends and peers and their religious beliefs. Teachers should be understanding of this specific cultural and religious sensitivity.

# **Prayer**

## **Daily prayer**

Islam urges 'God consciousness' in the individual's life. To that end, Islam prescribes that believers perform prayer five times each day. Two such times, in the midday and the late afternoon, may fall within regular school hours. It usually takes less than 15 minutes to accomplish the religious requirements of the prayer.

## **Washing or Ablution**

Before each prayer, Muslims are required to wash their faces, hands and feet with clean water. This washing is normally performed in the rest-room sink or other facility that has running water, and takes about two minutes.

## **Prayer Space and Time**

During prayer the Muslim will stand and recite some Quran, bow and prostrate to the ground. Prayer may be performed in any quiet, clean room. During the prayer the worshipper will face towards Makkah (North East or East in America usually). Total privacy is not required, but preferred. However, others should not walk in front of or interrupt the worshipper during the prayer. When the Muslim prays, he or she is fully engaged. He or she may not respond to a conversation. Students and teachers should not take offense if the worshipper does not answer their call during the prayer. However, in case of an emergency, the Muslim will respond to an announcement by stopping the prayer immediately.

## **Friday Congregational Prayer**

In Islam, Friday is the day for congregational worship, called 'Jum'ah'. It is an obligation that must be fulfilled upon those who reach the age of puberty. 'Jum'ah' can last up to an hour and takes place at the mosque during midday prayer. Those who are conscientious about attending this prayer may request a temporary release from school or an extended lunch period. In high schools and universities where the number of students interested in performing the prayer is large, the function can be conducted by students on the school premises.

In conclusion, with the recent leaps in communication technology and the changing demographics of our communities, American society is coming face to face with new cultures, new beliefs and new ideas.

Giving students the tools to interact, to understand, and to learn from other cultures will offer them invaluable insights into the basic human qualities that we all share.

As God says in the Quran: "O Mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and a female, and made you into many different nations and tribes, so that you may get to know one another...'

We hope that this guide will be an important step toward that goal.

If there are any further questions about the topics mentioned here, or you or your staff would like hands-on cultural sensitivity training please contact us at:

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