

Muslim students need support during Ramadan



At a time of rising anti-Muslim discrimination, advocates say U.S. schools aren't doing enough to ensure students feel supported.

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Last year during Ramadan, Zara Ahmad's school in southern Maryland hosted a waffle day. The smells of batter and syrup wafted through the campus hallways. Ahmad did everything she could to ignore the aromas, but the decision to hold the event then felt insensitive, given that she and other Muslim students were fasting.

"Even if they know, they just don't care and they're not as considerate as they could be," said Ahmad, 16, reflecting on how teachers and administrators

handle day-to-day operations during the Islamic holy month of fasting, prayer and community.

Several times in recent decades, the U.S. Education Department has issued guidance about affirming students' right to pray and express their religion at school. Last year, the department released the guidance again – specifically alluding to protections related to Ramadan, which began last week and runs through April 9.

The latest guidance came as a growing number of school districts have taken steps to better accommodate students who observe Ramadan, including

making Eid al-Fitr, the Muslim holy day that marks the end of Ramadan, an official day off for all students.

At a time of rising anti-Muslim discrimination, however, advocates say U.S. schools aren't doing enough to raise awareness and ensure that students feel supported when practicing their religion.

Teachers are often unaware that the holiday is taking place, putting the onus on kids or parents to request exemptions from certain activities or a place where students can pray.

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Students

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The Education Department's civil rights arm separately issued a letter on Thursday reminding schools of their obligation to protect such students from discrimination, highlighting the heightened Islamophobia after war broke out in Gaza.

USA TODAY spoke with Amaarah DeCuir, an education researcher and expert on Muslim student experiences, about best practices for supporting Ramadan in schools. Here's what she said:

Lunchtime accommodations and places to pray

A key tenet of Ramadan is fasting from dawn to sunset, which means people observing the holiday often don't eat lunch. Schools should ensure children have a place to go during lunchtime other than the cafeteria, with its food smells and boisterous noises, said DeCuir, a lecturer at American University in Washington, D.C.

Often that place is the library. Experts recommend schools staff this lunchtime room or area with at least one adult to monitor children and ensure they have what they need, whether it's quiet time for reflection or a game to play and recharge.

Kids who choose to pray will also need a place to do so without being bothered.

Ahmad, who has been sitting in the cafeteria and doing her schoolwork since Ramadan began, had to ask the guidance counselor if she could pray in her office. This year, as with years before, "it's definitely on the students to figure out what they want to do" during school, she said.



Muslims gather at Times Square for the first Tarawih prayer of Ramadan on March 10. GETTY IMAGES

Flexible homework and testing

DeCuir stressed that Ramadan is a time of joy and reflection, when families may pray late at night and early in the morning. With fasting and limited sleep, students are sometimes low on energy.

That can make it difficult to concentrate on schoolwork at certain times of the day. DeCuir suggested that educators be flexible with students who need leeway. For example, allowing kids to take tests or do important assignments when they feel most energetic, be it morning or afternoon.

She noted that the holy month coincides with high-stakes testing this year in many states and said schools should be flexible about timing with students who need consideration.

At colleges and universities, it's typically up to faculty members to decide whether to accommodate Muslim students' needs during Ramadan, she said. Many professors penalize students for turning in assignments late or refuse to let them take an exam at a different time

than their peers.

Alternatives in PE, music class and extracurriculars

Because of the physical limitations that sometimes come with fasting, DeCuir stressed the importance of exempting students from high-intensity cardiovascular activities.

Some people also abstain from singing and listening to music during Ramadan. Those students should be allowed to opt out of music class or engage in alternative activities during that time.

Special consideration should also be made for children involved in after-school sports, DeCuir said.

Ahmad is an avid tennis player, and her parents have had to push the district to allow her to participate in competitions despite missing class to attend Muslim events. Administrators typically bar students from playing on days they are absent from school.

Her parents have also had to request permission for Ahmad to be picked up

from matches early so she'll be home in time to break the fast at night with her family.

"All these things can happen if the kids and parents ask for it," said Omar Ahmad, Zara's father. "But high school's a tough time for children as it is, and there's been a rise in Islamophobia and a backlash if you're different.

"So many kids aren't going to ask for it. Many parents might not even ask for it."

Proactive support for students

The Education Department guidance indicates that schools should excuse students from class so they can fast if such an allowance is requested. But policies with this kind of language place a heavy burden on children and families, DeCuir said.

"It requires a family or student to come before a school leader or classroom teacher to say: 'I'm Muslim. I'm observing Ramadan.'" Since the Oct. 7 Hamas attack and the war in Gaza, that can be "extremely difficult and risky for many Muslims across the nation," she said.

DeCuir shared the story of a person she knows whose daughter wanted to bring Ramadan goody bags to school for her classmates, including cards, stickers and fidget spinners – similar to how kids bring treats for Christmas or Easter – but the principal rejected the idea.

The effect crushed the child's spirit, she said, and the family has since challenged the decision.

Ahmad, the student, says she has noticed a similar chilling effect at her school. When conversations about Islamic countries come up in government class, for example, she sometimes feels compelled to minimize her identity.

At the very least, "I just wish school would mention (Ramadan) and make all the students aware of it," she said.

"I wish I didn't have to feel awkward."