

**These notes were compiled from the Policy Subcommittee Running Notes document and from the draft minutes wherever available.**

### **10/14 Meeting Notes Holiday Calendar Discussion**

Dr. Nolin indicated that there is a wide range of examples of what other committees have done to address the growing diversity in teacher and student populations. For example, Andover and Medford have moved to a model where there are no specific religious days off in their teacher contracts so that teachers can choose the days that are most important to them.

It was asked if the need for a policy like this was about student attendance or more about substitute availability? Dr. Nolin indicated that it was both and also in line with our desired state in our equity goals - belonging is the backdrop to equity. She expressed that currently, some of our students are not seeing their holidays represented in our calendar. They have asked for some grace around attendance in some cases and homework and tests in others. In our teacher contract, we have a phrase that allows someone the day off if they celebrate a religious holiday that we have not acknowledged and we need that for our students as well. Dr. Nolin referenced Mass Gen Law 151C.

The sub-committee suggested we meet with the Interfaith Clergy of Natick at the November 4th meeting. It was asked if we should make an effort to invite the public at large to the meeting to be sure that we had a diverse group of voices. Dr. McKenzie offered to reach out to her colleagues at Babson as well.

The sub-committee had a brief discussion about inclusion, how to include everyone without eventually leaving someone out.

### **10/28 Meeting Notes Holiday/Homework Policy**

Dr. McKenzie suggested future dates for inviting guest speakers to discuss the Holiday Calendar: 11/9 at 12, 11/19 at 1:00, 11/22 at 1:00.

Dr. Nolin indicated that her attempt to make contact with the Interfaith Council in Natick had been unsuccessful as it disbanded during the Pandemic. She reminded the sub-committee that the goal of the policy is to have some grace for kids who are celebrating important religious holidays so that they do not feel that their school work is conflicting.

Dr. McKenzie asked how this policy will impact negotiations? Ms. Collins indicated that it would only impact negotiations if we are talking about days off and not about revising standards around homework and tests. A discussion about how districts determine their days off ensued. Dr. Nolin indicated that our Holidays for staff is determined by low attendance because of the number of substitutes that would be required. Dr. McKenzie asked, if we changed Good Friday, for example, would we have a low day of attendance? Ms. Collins wondered and then confirmed that the School Committee can change the calendar for the following year.

Dr. Nolin suggested that we focus on a homework and test policy first to see if it will lead to other changes in the future.

### **11/23 Meeting Notes Holidays Calendar Timeline**

The Committee discussed the coming meetings with religious leaders in the next two Sub Committee meetings. Dr. McKenzie asked if we could create a list of questions to ask the guests. She also asked Dr. Nolin to send the Westborough calendar to the attendees so that we can understand their perspective on the most weighty Holidays for their tradition.

Ms. Collins referred to a few different approaches to this work and noted that we need to be sure that we do not end up including so many days that all of the work gets crammed into sections of the year.

Dr. McKenzie noted that there are religious holidays, like Ramadan, for example that we are going to want to include if we are going to create an inclusive calendar. She liked how the Westboro policy had four categories that would give teachers a road map. Dr. Nolin indicated that the district does have to argue with the teachers a lot about these kinds of things. They tend not to like having tests on different days because students may be able to get the answers. She referenced that the district has put out notices about Holidays and yet homework still gets assigned on key days. We have no teeth. A policy like this is also aligned with our emerging diversity goals. It would be good to get out ahead of this before it turns into a civil rights issue like it has in other districts.

If we have policies and calendars about anti bias and cultural celebrations, it's no longer like we have cancelled whatever else happened. It's just, this is what we do here. This is what our district needs to attend to and not in a one off way that teachers have to do now. Ms. Collins affirmed that a policy gives the district some teeth.

Dr. McKenzie noted that, using her own tradition as an example, that in order to make room for a more inclusive calendar, a holiday like Good Friday might need to come off the calendar. Dr. Nolin shared that it is difficult to say because that may be a holiday that would be a day of low attendance and so it could not be changed. Ms. Collins suggested that we look at rates of attendance for the holidays that we do not have off currently as another piece of data to consider. Ms. Brunell concurred with this thought because it would make it more personal to Natick instead of using another district's policy.

Dr. McKenzie informed the Sub Committee that Columbus Day/Indigenous People's Day is going to be at the next full Committee meeting with the move to keep it as is this coming year but to encourage the Select Board and town to move on this together in the future. There is also a bill at the state level that we are going to track.

Dr. Nolin offered a quick summary of tasks from the meeting: Ms. Brunell will come with an aggregate of Anti Bias and Hate resources to consider. Dr. Nolin will come with a potential of

dates for focus groups - kids, parents, community at large. We'll have a couple of each and assign them to members of the committee. In the first of January, Dr. Nolin will shoot for bringing the SEL and Race and Culture surveys to the Committee. Dr. McKenzie will draft something with the Westboro Holiday policy to send to the guests and ask them to present the weightiness of any Holidays in their respective traditions.

Ms. Brunell asked if this Holiday Homework/Test Calendar would have any impact on bargaining? Ms. Collins stated that changing days off would. Policies around things like homework, tests and quizzes would not. She offered that we should keep the teachers in the loop that we are working on this calendar because it is good practice.

### **12/2 Meeting Notes**

#### **Holidays Calendar Timeline**

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### **12/29 Meeting Notes**

#### **Homework/Calendar Policy**

At 1:14 Dencia Ratley, the Director of Religious and Spiritual Life from Babson College and Bilal Miraz, Muslim Chaplin joined the meeting virtually.

Dr. McKenzie welcomed our guest speakers and introduced the members. Next, Dr. Nolin thanked them for coming and provided a brief background of the task at hand. She indicated that Natick has been focusing on creating a more welcoming and belonging culture for our emerging diversity in our student body and their families. She referenced her own experience in Westboro, an extremely diverse suburb of Worcester, and how the school district created a really smart sensitive, cultural, religious homework and school event calendar that allowed families some flexibility. She indicated we were working on the same thing in Natick and were appreciative of their help in advising us.

Dr. McKenzie acknowledged that historically our calendar has been biased towards Judeo-Christian traditions and she welcomed their help in understanding some of the significance behind Holidays in other traditions represented in our student body. She invited them to speak to us from their experience in working with students at Babson around the sensitivity Dr. Nolin described.

Ms. Ratley first thanked us for doing this type of work. She explained her experience of creating an inclusive calendar at Babson came with some difficulty because Holidays are listed as different days on different websites. She encouraged us to be as inclusive as possible with the caveat that there will always be mistakes and needed adjustments. Her approach to that is to always welcome feedback and involve the people who know more about her than she does at times. She shared a story about a student who was Jade and who needed to return to her temple

for a family celebration. It meant that she needed an exemption to take an exam on another day and the student worked through Ms. Ratley's office to achieve that permission. The question that stood out to Ms. Ratley during the process was, "Can we accommodate this student?"

Mr. Miraz shared his personal experience being Muslim in the Framingham Public Schools. At that time, he would have to take the days off of school and they would not be excused absences. That bothered him because as a young student, things like perfect attendance was something to celebrate. He also shared on some Holidays, he would spend 1.5-2 hours a night accompanying their family at the Mosque. Students often have to decide if they are going to engage in their religious practice or their studies.

From a Muslim perspective, he would encourage us to think about two holiday - the ending of Ramadan and the beginning of the Hijjah period. He acknowledged that since it is a lunar calendar, the dates can be complicated to follow.

Mr. Miraz affirmed that the Westboro policy made a lot of sense to him especially because it allows you to put different Holidays into categories around who would be impacted. This allows for students to still be recognized in their traditions while allowing for some simplicity in the implementation.

He referenced how even within religions there is diversity of practice and traditions where there still might be gaps that are missed. He encouraged the committee to view him as a resource in the future around these more nuanced topics.

Dr. Nolin expressed a hope in creating a flexible manner of attending to students so they can advocate if they are observant of something that is not happening.

Mr. Miraz shared that districts are attending to this in different ways, for example, Cambridge Public Schools has now recognized both Eids for Muslims as days off.

Ms. Brunell asked if something like that is important because they have a majority of Muslim students or if it is something he thinks a district, with a smaller population, should consider as well. Mr. Miraz thought the categories again in the Westboro calendar were a great way to approach days how a Holiday is recognized. He referenced his experience with teachers who were accommodating around major holidays. He didn't need the day off, necessarily, he needed to know he would have the time and the ability to make the work up.

Dr. McKenzie asked him to speak about fasting and if there were things that we could provide as a district for students who were engaging in that practice. He suggested educating the staff to understand how student may feel excited to participate in something like this and if possible, to offer an alternative space so students could have the option to read or rest during the lunch period.

Mr. Miraz also offered that there is usually one or two prayer times that fall within a school day. As far as he has heard, it is usually up to the student to request a quiet space to pray for 5

minutes. Also, on Fridays, all post-pubescent males are required to listen to a sermon and participate in congregational prayer. He shared that he had a friend who left school, with his mother's permission every Friday at 12:30. If there is a group of students who would like to do this, you could think about offering a space. Dr. Nolin referenced that she's had two students request this over her 18 years in the district and we made a conference space available to them.

Dr. McKenzie noted that we were coming to the end of the time of the meeting. She wondered if there were other religions or resources that Ms. Ratley could advise us on. Ms. Ratley suggested we contact the Hindu chaplain at Tufts. She also noted that Diwali is celebrated at different times so in naming that on the calendar, they find a compromise. Ms. Ratley indicated that she works with the President's office on what Holidays are announced to the community. For example, any religious Holiday where a student is fasting or there is an obligation of participation, her office sends out a message indicating that there are members of our community observing this Holiday and encourages them to be respectful of it. She has found that to distinguish which ones to highlight to the entire community. In the future, she is hoping to send out a summary email once a month to remind people of the calendar that was sent at the beginning of the year. She emphasized that she always encourages people to contact the office if they have missed something or made a mistake. The sub-committee thanked the speakers for coming and Dr. McKenzie for arranging the meeting.

Ms. Ratley and Mr. Miraz left the meeting at 2:01

Ms. Brunell offered to speak to the Hindu Chaplain at Tufts if Dr. McKenzie could make the introduction.

Dr. McKenzie offered that the conversation affirmed the direction that we are going and the Westboro policy that Dr. Nolin had highlighted for us.

Dr. Nolin indicated that it may be time to poll the student and family population about what practices we have in our district and that she would follow up with our attorney to see if she can do that. She suggested we may be able to get the data from the census as well.

Dr. Nolin wondered if any of our early release days could be lined up with some of these Holidays where we won't be able to take a day off entirely but where families could be freed up to go to the evening services. The committee agreed that was a good idea if possible.

### **1/20 Meeting Notes**

#### **School Calendar/Homework and Homework Policy Update**

Dr. McKenzie introduced two guests, Dr. Preeta Banerjee, Hindu Advisor at Tufts University and Ms. Swati Dave, resident of Natick. Dr. Banerjee shared that she was speaking as a mother with children attending public schools in another district, a practicing Hindu and a Hindu advisor to a University. Ms. Dave introduced herself as a resident of Natick for the past 16 year, a practicing

Hindu and a member of the boards of SPARK Kindness, Natick is United and The Natick Cultural District.

Dr. Banerjee shared a slide presentation entitled, Considering Hindu Celebrations within the Natick Public School Policy Equality and Cultural Observances Framework with the committee. Her presentation worked to give a foundation of Hindu celebrations as those taking place in the 4th largest after Christianity, Islam and unaffiliated and the consideration as such central to any conversations being had within diversity, equity and inclusion models. She noted that because of regional differences, at times Hindus are celebrating the same Holiday but call it different things and celebrated in different ways. She also noted that Jains and Sikhs also celebrate Diwali. She advised that Diwali be made a category 1 holiday, Navratri/Durga be made category 2 and Holi, category 3.

Ms. Davis concurred and asked the committee consider this because of the amount of Indian families moving to Natick and because some of the neighboring towns have this as well (Holliston, Hopkinton Ashland, Westborough). She is hearing from Natick residents asking, “How can we make this happen in Natick?”

The committee spoke about the strategic plan and efforts to make belonging a reality for the students. We also acknowledged that we do not know the % of Hindu students within Natick Public Schools. The speakers were asked questions about how the Holiday is celebrated, when the celebrations begin and if a ½ day for Diwali would be a step in the right direction. Dr. Banerjee responded that anything that acknowledges these holidays in a deeper way will benefit everyone in the community. She expressed that when it becomes part of the calendar, it becomes a teachable moment that can happen within schools and the community.

Dr. Nolin shared that we can poll our families but that it would need to be a voluntary response - a survey for example in the blast instead of an email in their inbox. Dr. Banerjee suggested to be careful to be sure that any poll is not worded in a way that makes the question comparative and that this is not about taking away another group’s holiday.

Ms. Brunell shared a document that compiled the decisions around religious holidays that some of the surrounding towns and members within Natick’s DART (our “like school” co-hort identified by the Department of Education) have done. She noted that there are districts moving to include Jewish, Hindu, Islamic and Christian traditions, there are some that are doing a mix and acknowledging those that are not days off by name on their calendars and there are some that have moved to a secular calendar - removing all religious holidays from the calendar and only take off Federal Holidays.

Dr. Banerjee responded by referencing two studies. One was about how meaning making, even when done without specific religious rituals, is a stress relieving experience essential for people today. The other was about if employees take time paid time off when the calendar is made more secular - Deloitte and McKinsey have reported on this - and the answer is no. For students that is translated into, I can’t go to temple because I have to do my homework. She encouraged the committee to think about who will galvanize behind celebration and meaning making in a culture that is already dominated by a Protestant based work ethic.

The committee considered the question about the impact adding more days off to the calendar for families and especially those who do not have many options for childcare or flexible work schedules. How do we weigh the pull towards diversity, equity and inclusion work that encourages acknowledging more of the religions in our district among the reality that taking more days in the midst of the year will create more of a hardship for some of our families?

The committee thanked the speakers for coming. Dr. Banjeree and Ms. Davis offered to be a resource as we continue to discuss. Both left the meeting at 1:35.

Dr. Nolin reminded the committee that for the students it is always about belonging. She said, it's not really about a day off but it's about being seen and for allowing their culture to be graded into something as they way the calendar is perceived. She referenced this is like celebrating Pride Month - at some point are we messaging in the Natick Public Schools that we value the diversity of our students. She indicated that with Ms. Collins, the work of Influence 100 group has taught them that when looking to build a diverse culture within staff, the district needs to have or create the diverse hallmarks that will help you attract the very people who value those hallmarks.

The committee asked if Diwali was moved to a ½ day, if that would have implications for staff members who celebrate but would have professional development. If some religions have full days off and others have ½ day does that signal something unintentional about the value of each faith? The committee acknowledged that it also wanted to reach out to the Coptic community in Natick. Also, that it had not discussed the Lunar New year.

The committee discussed some of the practical implications of including all of the days vs. moving to a secular model.

Dr. Nolin suggested that a question on the thought exchange could be “When you think about religious and cultural observances, what is important for the Natick School Committee to know about how your family experiences those days.” She reminded us that reshaping time for professional development takes place within the negotiations. For example, taking one full professional development day is the equivalent of 4 half days. We could get survey data, work through the negotiations with staff and know more about a few things by the 2023-2024 school year.

It was asked if it was too late to change anything for the next school year, 2022-2023. Dr. Nolin acknowledged that it is not operationally but that we need to bring this to the full committee and gather more information from the public.

Dr. Nolin summarized that she hears that the subcommittee is aligned in a philosophical way to honor more parts of our community while acknowledging their religious and cultural traditions and that we are stuck only by the DESE parameters and not wanting to elongate the school year beyond what is tolerable.

She suggested the subcommittee have a listening session where a presentation is made by this subcommittee to show what we have been working on to hear from interested constituents and to



share with our committee. The final vote of the calendar usually happens in April so consensus was reached to set a date at the end of March before Town Meeting starts. We will have a working meeting in the coming weeks to create that presentation.

The committee briefly spoke of the name on the NPS calendar for the Federal Holiday Columbus Day. Dr. Nolin suggested we keep it as is until we know more about the move the town is making. It was also pointed out that another community does not list the names at all but simply indicates the day is off because of a Federal Holiday. We will continue the conversation but at this point, we will share with the Chair of the full committee that we are not ready to make a recommendation.

Ms. Brunell left the meeting at 2:06 and rejoined on the phone at 2:08.

Dr. Nolin updated the committee on our Public Speak policy. Our attorney agreed that we needed to make public speak accessible to anyone with a disability, that the disability need not be proven but simply shared with the Chair. At that point, accommodations should be made for Public Speak. It was asked if we could revise our Public Speak to allow for members of the public to speak for items that are ON the agenda. Dr. Nolin advised that our attorney's opinion is that yes, we can revise our public speak to look like another district policy as long as that policy has been vetted legally.

### **3/24 Meeting Notes**

#### **School Calendar/Homework and Homework Policy Update**

Dr. McKenzie introduced the Holiday calendar for Natick Public Schools and the decision before us.

Fr. Himes asked if the decision was bound by union contracts. Dr. Nolin indicated that we have to be in session 180 days and by law we have to be finished by June 30th.

Fr. Himes spoke about the Triduum celebration from the evening to Holy Thursday - Easter. He explained that the three days are one complete celebration. Even without a sanctioned service in the morning, Good Friday is a day of prayer, fasting and waiting for the Resurrection. Christmas, Easter, Holy Thursday and Good Friday are all considered high holidays in the church.

Fr. Himes acknowledged that we are a country that wants to celebrate religious diversity. He asked if it would be possible to add a day at the beginning or the end of the year. He asked this as an alternative to swapping Good Friday with another Holiday for example. Dr. Nolin acknowledged that as an option.

Dr. McKenzie spoke of districts like Andover and Maynard who have taken Good Friday and/or all of the Holidays off the calendar. She asked for his response to making Good Friday a ½ day.

He said he can conceive of that, but he wonders if it would be a slippery slope.

He encouraged us to think about the benefit having a day off allows for a person's consciousness. He spoke of religious freedom as a central tenet of our democracy and hopes that the district that would consider that as an aspect in this policy when considering any religion.

Ms. Brunell summarized the range of options the sub committee has researched from other districts.

Dr. McKenzie suggested that the benefit of the Westboro Policy puts some of the ownership on the parents to name what Holidays are important to their family.

Dr. Nolin asked how many families the church serves. He estimates about 6,000 families and even those that consider themselves culturally Catholic are most likely to attend on Good Friday and Easter. His guess is that Catholics may be the largest population of religions in Natick.

Fr. Himes thanked us and ended by saying that "as an American, I think there is room in the public square for religion." He remembered in Andover, years back they didn't schedule Good Friday and ended up with a low day of attendance for the district.

We thanked him for coming to the meeting.

Fr. Himes left at 1:37

We worked on the slides for the April 5th listening session.

Dr. Nolin gave a preview of her edits in the policy manual for next week's meeting.

### **6/14 Meeting Notes Holiday Calendar**

We discussed input that we've received from members of the public after the listening sessions.

Strongest policy - Westboro policy

Categories

Make ups

Receive time off from school assignments

Last day of school before category - 2nd class meeting

Category 2 no homework on the last day of school before the holiday

Rosh Hanna

Yom Kipur

Thanksgiving

Diwali

Good Friday

Eid

Lunar New Year

Education component from the teachers

Catherine suggested that Dr. Nolin meet with teachers and bring that back to the committee, the other members disagreed.

Anna will bring dates back.

Nothing we can do for 2022

High frequency holidays -

Homework - Category 3

- Night before, the day of the holiday and the day after.

It's going to be School committee policy

Staff manual -

Catherine made a motion that the administration write a category 3 - homework policy to ensure that students do not receive homework/tests in the 2022-2023 school year on major holidays - not seconded.

Motion amend that the policy subcommittee writes category 3 policy - 2-1-0

emotional response, we're not doing the leadership work, stakeholder engagement.

## **7/7 Meeting Notes**

### **Summary of what we have done this year:**

- Vaccination Policy for staff

- Extracurricular Vaccination Policy for students
- Goal planning meetings (September and October)
- Bus Policy, photo release, discussion of One Wilson
- Microaggression Policy including Northampton policies - Anti Hate/Bias policies, restorative justice
- Organized Listening Groups with religious Groups:

Temple Shir Tikva guests and Rev. Ian Natick Common Street Spiritual Center
Denicia Ratley, Director of Rel&Spiritual Life at Babson College Bilal Miraz, Muslim Chaplin
Fr. Hines from St. Patricks, Natick
Dr. Preeti Banerjee, Hindu Advisor at Tufts University and Ms. Swati Dave
St. Mark's Coptic Church, Natick

- Created a powerpoint and held listening sessions on the Homework/Holiday Calendar with:
  - students at NHS, KMS
  - teachers at NHS, KMS
  - community members and families
- Initiated discussion on Columbus/Indigeneous Peoples' Day
- Revisited the Mask Policy in January
- Planned communication strategy with Cassie on the homework/Holiday Calendar
- Heard Andy's recommendations AC-AC/R
- Non Public Schools Policy
- Revisited the vaccination policy for students and staff - sent to full committee for approval
- Homework Calendar and Equity Policy end of year review

Will the committee have a new member in the coming year?

Acknowledged this an enjoyable committee - we can have a more organic and open discussion

It's a great place to learn about the policies of the district