

Proposed Work Plan for Evaluating the Natick Public Schools Calendar

Background

Over the past several months, the policy sub-committee has explored how religious observances are recognized in the school year calendar. This exploration stemmed from an initial focus on revisions and updates to the homework and religious observance policies.

On January 9, 2023, several documents were provided by the sub-committee to the full committee to report on this exploration. Documents can be accessed via the [January 9th agenda meeting materials](#). In addition, the policy sub-committee provided a recommendation of adding two additional days out of school for religious observances within the school year calendar.

Rationale for Additional Work

The policy sub-committee did outstanding work, particularly in their meetings with religious leaders. The religious leaders provided background information on their faith and identified some of the most important religious observances within those faiths. The research on how other districts have decided to recognize religious observances in their school calendars was also significant and instructional.

While the work to date is meaningful, it is limited in the following ways:

- As documented in the reports, only 18 NPS family/community members attended one listening session.
- 35-45 NPS staff attended two listening sessions. One session at Kennedy was attended by 10 staff and one session at the high school was attended by 25-35 staff. We do not have documentation from the meeting at the high school.
- The work was limited to religious observances and did not include cultural observances
- The caveats/follow up action steps, put in place within the recommendation, beyond allowing for the days out of school, cannot be easily implemented or reside outside the purview of the School Committee, as noted in a recent email from Dr. Nolin.

It should be noted that one question was added to the scheduling survey that went out to the community. However, the question only asked responders to identify the holidays they observe. In addition to providing information on holidays observed, respondents shared a wide range of opinions on how the School Committee should consider observing religious holidays in a school calendar, in addition to raising concerns about adding days of school closure.

Workplan

A careful review of the data from the policy subcommittee [community and staff listening sessions](#), as well as the one question survey response, do not fully support the recommendation made to the full committee. They do indicate a diversity of opinion in the community that has not yet been fully explored or understood.

In order to make this decision, the magnitude of which should not be underestimated nor understated, the full committee should engage in a meaningful community engagement process to fully understand the wants, needs, and priorities of the community we serve. The definition of community in this case includes NPS staff. In addition, a fully revised and vetted homework/extracurricular activities policy should be enacted to ensure that any student who is out of school for a religious observance feels fully able to fulfill their faith obligation and is not penalized for missing a school day.

Proposed process

- **Fully revised and vetted homework/extracurricular activities policy**

From anecdotal evidence, we know that the current policy is implemented unevenly and leaves room for interpretation. A revised policy is necessary that is clear, strong, and instructive. It should include clear expectations for students and staff on homework, tests, and extracurricular activities on the day of and the day after a student is absent due to a religious or cultural observance.

The policy subcommittee is currently working on revisions to this policy and the religious observance policy. The proposed policy should be vetted by the EAN to understand the impact to classroom teaching, curriculum, and school year timelines.

No additional religious observances as days out of school should be added to the school year calendar until the policy is fully vetted and approved. Adding additional days out of school without a strong policy, especially for days that are observed by a smaller number of students and staff, purportedly only makes the current problem worse.

Timeline: End of 2022-23 School Year

- **Community engagement process, inclusive of families and staff**

The Natick Public Schools has reached a critical moment in evaluating its school year calendar. Like other districts with growing diverse populations, it has become essential for the district to understand how to recognize religious and cultural observances within the school year calendar. The recognition of these observances must be weighed against the mandates of the school district under state law, including time on learning, testing, and curriculum requirements. They must also be considered together with the values of the community and the professional commitment of the educators serving our students.

To understand the wants, needs, values, and priorities of the Natick community with regard to the school year calendar, the Natick School Committee should undertake a community engagement process that explores the following topic areas:

Religious and Cultural Observances

Sample issue areas/questions:

- Type celebrated
- Priority celebrations/observances
- Requirements from calendar (recognition, full day off, half day, no homework, no extracurricular activities, etc.)
- Preferences from calendar (recognition, full day off, half day, no homework, no extracurricular activities, etc.)
- Data on how days are currently handled by family and staff when a religious observance is a school day in session.

Values and Priorities Relative to School Calendar

Sample issue areas/questions:

- Opinion on current calendar
- Priorities when considering change to days in and out of session
- Understanding of how best to reflect religious diversity in public school calendar
- How to balance quality of educational service with state requirements with commitment to equity
- Value of day off vs. different type of recognition
- Challenges of childcare on days out of school (religious and cultural observances, professional development days, etc.)

Exploration of Options

- Share complexity with families and staff
- Identify calendar options and ask for feedback

Input from Educators

- Feedback on students who currently miss school due to religious observance
- Impact on curriculum when days out of school are added
- Ability to accommodate excused absences
- Impact to curriculum/teaching and learning
- Value of day off vs. different type of recognition
- Understanding of staffing on religious observance days

The community engagement process would include the following:

- Focus group sessions organized by faith
- General focus group sessions (families and staff)
- Development of a systemwide survey. Translated and with targeted outreach to populations not typically responsive to surveys.

Timeline: Fall 2023

Following the community engagement conducted in fall 2023, the School Committee will be prepared to make recommendations for the 2024-25 school year calendar. The recommendation may include one of the options explored during the community engagement phase or it may include a new option based upon the data received.

Through development of a strong policy, coupled with a deep and meaningful staff and community engagement process, the Natick School Committee will have the information it needs to make a decision about the school calendar that reflects the values and priorities of the Natick Public School community.