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NYC Muslims push to add holidays to school year

By SUZANNE MA, The Associated Press

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NEW YORK -- Moneeb Hassan remembers having to choose between a final exam in American history or celebrating the Muslim holy day of Eid al-Adha. In the end, he chose both.

Hassan, 17, is one of thousands of Muslim students in the city who must perform a balancing act between his academic and religious obligations during his holidays. But the nation's largest school district hasn't sanctioned official Muslim holidays.

"People came to this country for freedom of religion," Hassan said. "We're just asking for fair and equal treatment."

Muslim activists lobbying to add the holy days to the school calendar - which takes school off for Christmas and the Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur - were heartened this week by a City Council resolution supporting the observance of the two holidays - Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.

A handful of school districts in New Jersey and Michigan have recognized Muslim school holidays, while efforts in Baltimore and Connecticut have failed recently.

New York City has the nation's largest school system. A 2008 study by Columbia University's Teachers College estimates at least 10 percent of the city's 1.1 million students are Muslim.

Supporters say the school board needs to be inclusive of the growing number of Muslim



This July 1, 2009 photo shows Moneeb Hassan, 17, in front of his high school, Benjamin N. Cardozo, in New York. Hassan, 17, is one of thousands of Muslim students in the city who must perform a balancing act between his academic and religious obligations during his holidays. But the nation's largest school district hasn't sanctioned official Muslim holidays. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)

students in New York.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg spoke out against approving the holidays this week, saying it would open the door to other religious groups asking for days off.

"One of the problems you have with a diverse city is that if you close the schools for every single holiday there won't be any school," Bloomberg told reporters on Tuesday. "Educating our kids requires time in the classroom and that's the most important thing to us more than anything else."

A day later, he sounded like he might be willing to give it some thought, saying that he would take a closer look at the resolution. But he still stuck to his original point that honoring every religious holiday isn't practical.

Eid al-Fitr, or the Festival of Breaking the Fast,

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marks the end of the sacred month of Ramadan. Eid Christians."

al-Adha, or the Feast of the Sacrifice, is celebrated in the fall and commemorates the prophet Ibrahim's faith in being willing to sacrifice his son.

The stress of catching up on school work, rescheduling exams and having to ask for special permission to miss classes for the holidays is a routine Muslim students shouldn't have to go through, Hassan said.

He remembers finishing his 7 a.m. history exam in just 40 minutes, racing out of the classroom, jumping into his father's car and speeding off to the mosque. If the exam was later in the day, he would have missed the morning prayer, a significant part of the Eid celebration.

City Councilman Robert Jackson, a Muslim, said he and a coalition of over 80 community groups in the city will begin canvassing the mayor's office for his support for the holiday.

If Bloomberg isn't receptive, "we may have to consider legal action," he said. "Discrimination may be an issue in this case."

Jackson said a bill that would mandate the holidays as state law has been introduced in Albany.

Susan Fani, a spokeswoman for the Catholic League, said she didn't oppose recognizing Muslim holidays in public schools, but was concerned that Catholics and Christians in the city were not treated with the same amount of respect and sensitivity.

"Catholics get a Santa Claus or a tree," but aren't allowed to display nativity scenes in school, Fani said. "We just want to make sure that the enthusiasm that City Council is showing towards Muslims is the same kind of enthusiasm they are showing toward

But others welcomed the idea, saying it is a chance for the city to extend an olive branch to the Muslim community.

"The more we support one another in our spiritual quest, the better off we become as a society," said Rabbi Michael Weisser of the Free Synagogue in Queens.

"Children are exempted from school during Rosh Hashanah. A fair minded person would have to agree that our brother religion of Islam should have the same sort of benefit. It's an issue of fairness."

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