

AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO RAMADAN & ACCOMODATING MUSLIM STUDENTS



2019 GUIDE



CAIR
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About CAIR-Missouri

The Missouri Chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-Missouri) is a chapter of the largest civil liberties and advocacy organization for Muslims in the United States. Our mission is to enhance the understanding of Islam, protect civil rights, promote justice, and empower American Muslims.

This guide is intended as a source of information to educators on understanding the month of Ramadan and their Muslim students who might be fasting during this month. The guide will give advice to educators on the unique challenges Muslim students face while fasting.

Disclaimer: The information contained in this booklet is designed to inform educators about the sincerely-held and/or religiously mandated practices/beliefs of Muslim students, which at times require educators to provide religious accommodations in compliance with state and federal laws.



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Glossary of Islamic Terms

- Allah: “God” in Arabic
- Eid: Two major religious celebrations, Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, commemorating important events in the Muslim year
- Halal: Commonly understood to mean “permissible”, signals what is acceptable in Islamic practice . Often used in the context of food such as halal meat
- Hijab: “Barrier” or “partition”, often used to refer to the headscarf worn by some Muslim women
- Islam: Commonly translated as “peace through God’s guidance”, the proper name for the religion of Muslims
- Jum’ah: Congregational prayers that occur on Friday afternoons similar to Sunday church services
- Masjid: Muslim house of worship
- Muslim: Follower of Islam
- Prophet: An individual believed to be chosen by God to deliver two messages: 1) God alone should be worshipped and 2) people should strive to live ethically by treating others as they wish to be treated
- Quran or Qur’an or Koran: The Holy Book of Islam, which is believed to be the word of God
- Ramadan: The lunar month in which Muslims are required to fast from dawn to dusk, and be especially God conscious
- Wuhdu: Ritual washing required before prayer, requires running water in order to cleanse hands, feet, and face

Understanding Ramadan:

Ramadan is the 9th month in the Islamic lunar calendar. The month may last for 29 to 30 days depending on the moon sighting with the lunar calendar. Fasting during the month of Ramadan is the fourth 'Pillar' of Islam, which is an act of worship and a religious obligation for Muslims. Fasting becomes obligatory for all males and females upon hitting the age of puberty. Fasting requires for Muslims to abstain from all forms of nourishment, food, liquids (including water), and smoking from pre-dawn till sunset. It is cultural for even younger children to fast for part of the month or the entire month; however, this is entirely optional and reflects family dynamics.

Ramadan is also a spiritual month where Muslims are encouraged to improve themselves in all aspects of their lives including their character, respect for others, kindness, forgiveness, mannerism, and avoiding bad language and other vices. They are also encouraged to increase in their worship to God through increased prayers, charity, reading more Qur'an, performing additional prayers in the Masjid, and other actions. Muslims are encouraged to continue to live their normal everyday lives and cope with the requirements of fasting. This includes going to school and participating in the day to day activities.





How Fasting Works:

- **Suhoor (the pre-dawn meal):** Muslims are encouraged to wake up pre-dawn and eat the suhoor meal. This is a light meal that Muslims eat in order to begin their fasting. The meal should be eaten right before dawn. In St. Louis, suhoor is around 4:37 A.M. on May 5th and by the end of the month suhoor will be around 4:07 A.M. After suhoor Muslims pray the Fajar (predaw) prayer and typically will try to get a few hours of before work or school.

- **Iftar (the breaking of the fast meal):** At the exact moment the sun sets, Muslims will break their fast in a meal called iftar. Traditionally, iftar involves eating dates and drinking something sweet. It is important to note that Muslims must break their fast exactly at sunset and cannot delay in breaking of their fast. Times for the breaking of the fast meal in St. Louis will be around 7:58 P.M. on May 5th and will move to 8:22 P.M. by June 3rd.

- The average time Muslims will fast this Ramadan in St. Louis: Roughly 15 hours

How Ramadan & Fasting Times Change

An important question that many ask is why does the fasting time change from the first of the month till the end of the month. The times of fasting are not related to specific times such as 8:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M., but reflect the sunrise and sunset. Each day, as the earth orbits around the sun, the days get incrementally longer in the summer and shorter in the winter. Thus, each day, the exact fasting time changes slightly.

Ramadan Returns to School:

The Islamic calendar, similar to the Jewish calendar, is based on the lunar calendar versus the Gregorian calendar. Thus, the start date of Ramadan begins 10 or 11 days earlier each year on the Gregorian calendar. Typically, every 30 years the month of Ramadan will be observed through every season and month from January to December.

This is important because over the last several years an entire generation of young Muslims have grown up when Ramadan was in the summer, during summer break. This has had important impacts on the younger Muslim population many of whom have become used to staying awake at night and sleeping during the day.



CHALLENGES WITH SHIFTING SLEEP SCHEDULE

Over the last several years when Ramadan was during the summer, many young Muslims would simply sleep during the day and stay up at night. The reasons for this are many. First, breaking of the fast would typically be around 8:30 P.M. or later in the summer months. After that, there is a late night prayer called Isha which typically begins at 10:00 P.M. In Ramadan there is a special series of prayers called “tarawhee” which are late night prayers that would begin after Isha and sometimes go until 11:00 P.M. or even later. By the time families would go to bed, it would be nearly midnight.

Muslims believe there is a lot of blessing in waking up for the Suhoor meal which would be around four hours later. Therefore students would enjoy the night rather than only sleep for four hours and potentially miss the Suhoor meal and the fajar prayer.

However, now that Ramadan is squarely during school and will remain so for nearly 15 years to come, educators can expect many students to struggle to adjust to the new sleeping schedule. This struggle will likely last until Ramadan moves past daylight savings in early March and enters the winter and fall months with shorter days.



Accommodating Muslim Students

Muslims typically view Ramadan with excitement and enthusiasm. Schools may choose to build on this excitement through the following proposed programs:

- **Prayer Breaks:** One of the main pillars in Islam is for Muslims to pray at five different time intervals throughout the day. In a typical school day, the afternoon 'Duzhr' prayer falls within school time. It can be empowering for educators to give Muslim students the option of praying in a safe space on the school campus throughout the year, but especially during Ramadan. Educators should remember that roughly two-thirds of the American-Muslim community are first or second generation immigrants. Their families may shy away from talking about faith in school and the accommodations that might need to be made. The result is many Muslim students may never ask for a safe space to pray out of fear. By providing a space and the option for Muslim students to take 5 to 10 minutes out of the school day for prayers during the time intervals of 1:00 P.M. – 3:00 P.M., educators will make their schools more welcoming to Muslim students. Note, educators should remember that not all Muslims have the same level of religious adherence so praying on campus should be an option given to students but not forced upon them.

- **Lunch Break:** Schools should look into alternative activities for Muslim students to engage in during the lunch break. For elementary schools, students should be given an option to not sit in the cafeteria during lunch but still be allowed to go outside for recess. For middle and high schools, alternative activities should be available and spaces for students to go should be provided.

Interesting Note: When Executive Director Faizan Syed of CAIR-Missouri was in the Kirkwood School district in the 90s and early 2000s, he would simply sit in the cafeteria during lunch from Kindergarten till he graduated High School. Being a child of immigrants, he never spoke to faculty about having an alternative space to go during the lunch break. Also, he just got used to sitting in the cafeteria and socializing with his friends and not eating in Ramadan. This example shows that while it is important for schools to offer alternatives, which Faizan may have taken, some students may prefer to continue their normal schedule.

-- **Physical Education:** During Ramadan, one's body adjusts to fasting and students are typically able to continue to participate in physical activities without putting themselves at risk or danger. Educators should still take caution and have conversations with fasting students who may feel tired, drowsy, have headaches, or other challenges that may necessitate that they reduce their participation in physical education. Schools may wish to plan alternative activities during Physical Education classes.

- **Swimming During Ramadan:** Typically, participation in swimming classes is acceptable. However, many Muslims may choose to not participate in swimming activities due to the risk of potentially swallowing water.

- **Taking Exams & Finals in Ramadan:** 2019, 2020, and potentially 2021 will see Ramadan fall within the times many schools may hold finals or end of year exams. Educators should speak to Muslim students in their classroom on what are some ways they could assist them in taking their exams.

- **College Finals:** In a college setting, exams could be offered to students earlier in the day as well as later in the day. Educators may choose to offer this to all of their students and not just Muslim students. With this option, students may take their exams right when they start fasting before getting tired or after finishing fasting when students have had a chance to eat and drink.

One time that should be avoided is the iftar, breaking of the fast, meal time. Students are required to both break their fast by eating a light meal and praying the Maghrib, sunset prayer. Allowing students to take their exams either before or after the iftar time will ensure an uninterrupted exam experience.

Exemptions for Fasting

Educators should be aware that there are religious exemptions for fasting in the Islamic tradition. These include medical conditions and situations where fasting may have a detrimental effect on health and physical wellbeing. This includes those who cannot survive without taking medication or nourishment, like some diabetics. Additionally, women who are menstruating are exempt from fasting.

Other exemptions include those travelling on long journeys may choose not to fast. Any fasting days that are not completed will need to be made up at a later date. In some circumstances, a person may not be able to make up missed fasting days in which case they would need to compensate for missing their fast by feeding the poor.

- **Advice for Nurses:** Religiously and culturally Muslims are reluctant to break their fast during the day. In some cases, Muslim students may need to break their fast and eat and drink something for the betterment of their health. However, some students may show hesitation or resistance and believe they can tough it out. It's important for the school nurse to remember that Islam does give exemptions for fasting when the physical wellbeing of a person is at stake. Nurses should engage in conversations with students if a crisis arises and remind them of this fact in the religion.

- **Medication:** Typically, no oral medication can be taken. Students often speak with their doctors to change their medical intake so they take it either before Suhoor or upon breaking of the fast at Iftar time. Medical injections can be taken by a fasting person as long as those injections are not adding nutrition to the body, like I.V. bags. In the event of an emergency, medicine should be administered. Routine vaccinations should be scheduled outside of Ramadan.



Celebrating the End of Ramadan with Eid Al-Fitr

Once the last day of Ramadan is over, Muslims celebrate the Holiday of Eid Al-Fitr. This holiday involves Muslims waking up early, dressing in their nicest clothing, and participating in an early morning prayer service either at a local Islamic Center or large hall. Muslims often visit family members, give gifts, and enjoy meals during the Eid Al-Fitr holiday. Schools should mark the potential date for Eid and give Muslim students those days off. Schools should also speak to teachers to avoid scheduling exams or major assignments due on the Eid Holiday. Note, in 2019, Eid will be celebrated outside of most school's regular school year. However, in 2020 and for over a decade beyond, Eid will be celebrated during the school year.

- **When is Eid?:** As mentioned before, the Islamic Calendar is based on the lunar calendar, thus different groups of Muslims may begin and end Ramadan on different dates and on rare occasions may celebrate Eid on different dates. This can be quite confusing to schools and believe it or not it, this is a point of confusion and tension amongst even the Muslim communities. A safe approach is to consider possibly two days that Eid Al-Fitr could potentially be celebrated.

- **Acknowledging Eid in Schools:** Some educators may wish to create a more welcoming space for their Muslim students by acknowledging Eid, if appropriate in the classroom, and may use the phrase "Eid Mubarak" which translates to Happy Eid.



Conclusion

In 2019, Ramadan will squarely be during the school year, this change comes after years of being over the summer. The information, advice, and potential accommodations mentioned throughout this guide are designed to assist educators in understanding Ramadan and the unique challenges it presents to Muslim students. It should be reiterated that every Muslim has different levels of adherence to their faith and educators should approach this as offering options to students. As American schools become more diverse schools throughout our nation, we will continue to deal with a more diverse student body. Understanding different faiths and creating inclusive policies and programs today will help in creating a more nurturing environment for all students.

Schools with additional questions may contact the CAIR-Missouri office at (314)722-6116 or email info@cair-mo.org.



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