



ASIAN AMERICAN LEGAL DEFENSE AND EDUCATION FUND

99 HUDSON STREET, 12 FL • NEW YORK, NY 10013 • TEL 212.966.5932 • FAX 212.966.4303 • INFO@AALDEF.ORG

**Statement of Khin Mai Aung, Staff Attorney
Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund**

**Before the New York City Council Committee on Education Regarding
Resolution No. 1281 calling upon the New York City Department of Education to
incorporate Eid Ul-Fitr and Eid Ul-Adha as school holidays**

September 26, 2008

My name is Khin Mai Aung, and I am a Staff Attorney at the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), where I direct the Educational Equity and Youth Rights Project. Founded in 1974, AALDEF protects and promotes the civil rights of Asian Americans through litigation, legal advocacy, and community education. Among other things, I represent students who are racial profiled or harassed in public schools simply because they are Muslim, or perceived as Muslim. I also conduct community education to inform new immigrant parents and students of their religious liberties under the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. Sadly, prejudice and profiling against Muslims persist in our public schools. AALDEF endorses the campaign to close New York City public schools on Eid Ul-Fitr and Eid Ul-Adha because it would send a powerful message that Muslims are a welcome and valued segment of New York City's diverse and vibrant student population.

One of my clients – a high school senior from Queens – was suspended for several days when he said he was afraid of a terrorist attack. School officials apparently thought he had actual information about an impending act of terrorism, just because he was Muslim. Another client – a Brooklyn middle schooler – was detained and questioned by police officers for saying he was willing to die for his country. Yet another transferred schools because classmates taunted her and tried to pull off her mother's hijab (head scarf). Closing school on the two Eids will emphasize that Muslims are an important part of New York City's public schools, and discourage profiling and harassment against Muslim students and parents.

Further, New York City public schools are closed on other religious holidays such as Christmas, Good Friday, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur. Like their Christian and Jewish peers, Muslim students should not have to choose between practicing their religion and attending school on the two Eids. New York City's vibrant and growing Muslim population is estimated at approximately 500,000, approximately one quarter of the national Muslim population.

For all the reasons set forth above, AALDEF urges the New York City Council to pass Resolution 1281 to call upon the New York City Department of Education to incorporate the Muslim holidays of Eid Ul-Fitr and Eid Ul-Adha into our public high school holiday calendar.

Testimony
Education Committee
New York City Council

Resolution 1281: Muslim holidays of Eid Ul-Fitr and Eid Ul-Adha
as observed school holidays in the city of New York

Dr. Louis Cristillo
Lecturer
Department of International and Transcultural Studies
Columbia University Teachers College
September 26, 2008

Chairman Robert Jackson and members of the Education Committee of the New York City Council:

Thank you for allowing me to testify on Resolution 1281, calling upon the Department of Education to incorporate the Muslim holidays of Eid Ul-Fitr and Eid Ul-Adha as observed school holidays. As a research assistant professor and currently lecturer at Columbia University Teachers College, I have done extensive research on Muslim communities in New York City for over a decade, and I recently completed a three-year study on Muslim youth in the New York City high schools. I would like to preface my testimony by saying that the views I will express are my own and should not be attributed to other faculty or to the trustees of Teachers College.

Overview

The Muslim holidays of Eid Ul-Fitr and Eid Ul-Adha should, I believe, be incorporated as observed school holidays because its purpose is to extend the constitutional protection of religious freedom to one of largest and fastest growing minority faith communities in the city. Resolution 1281 provides that equity and justice be granted in the service of guaranteeing Muslim children and their tax-paying families their rights to the free exercise of religion. Based on research conducted by Columbia University Teachers College and the School for International and Public Affairs from 1998 to 2008, a number of critical thresholds have been reached that, in my view, soundly justify the adoption of Resolution 1281: The first threshold is population size and demographics; the second is a crisis of identity and civic belonging facing American Muslim youth in the post-9/11 climate; and the third is the recurring failure of existing accommodations.

The Muslim Population of New York City

New York City is home to some 700,000 plus Muslims.¹ In the relatively short span of the last four decades, Muslims have become one of the fastest growing and most ethnically diverse faith communities in the city.² Of New York's US-born Muslims, the largest group is African-American, whose numbers may be as high as 150,000, about 20 to 25% of the total, followed by smaller numbers of Latinos and non-Hispanic white converts who account for fewer than 10%. Foreign-born Muslims and their offspring make up the largest percentage and collectively represent between 17 to 20% of the city's

entire foreign born population. These newcomers hail from over forty countries across vast geographies of social, linguistic and cultural diversity: Indo-Caribbean Muslims from Trinidad-Tobago and Guyana; Middle Easterners from Iran, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Yemen, Egypt, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisian, and Libya; Africans from Senegal, Sudan, Mauritania, Mali, Gambia, and Nigeria; Central and South Asians from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India, plus a small number of ethnic Muslims from China; also, Southeast Asians from Indonesia and Malaysia; and peoples of the Balkans from Bosnia, Kosovo, and Albania; and a small number from Azerbaijan in the Caucasus.

Muslim immigrants who arrived in the 1960s or earlier came primarily for economic reasons but built few institutions, while those who came since the late 1970s and early 1980s have primarily been well educated, middle class, and entrepreneurial. Not only have they quickly become integrated into blue-collar jobs, the service sector and professional fields, but they also have marshaled their economic resources to create small businesses, establish mosques, and open full-time private schools. Today New York City is home to at least 150 mosques that provide both religious and secular services to members of their communities. They range from modest storefront and commuter mosques, to large multipurpose community centers that offer not only religious services but also an array of health and social services.

The Muslim School-Aged Population of New York City

Today there are an estimated 120,000 Muslim children, roughly 12% of the student population, attending New York City public schools. That's enough to fill up the new Yankee Stadium to capacity twice and then some.³ This makes Muslim children one of the fastest growing religious minorities in our public schools.⁴ The proportion of Muslim students in any one school varies from one neighborhood locale to another. A school administrator of a local elementary school in Brooklyn reported to researchers from Columbia University that Muslim children make up as much as 20% of the enrollment. Equal or larger proportions are probably true for elementary schools in many neighborhoods in Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx where the population density of Muslim immigrants from Africa, South Asia and the Middle East is high, in addition to African American Muslim communities in Harlem, Brooklyn and elsewhere. Only about 4% of all school-aged Muslim children attend the city's fifteen full-time private Islamic schools. Thus, Muslim students in our public schools are numerous, growing in number, American-born, and contribute to the city's living heritage as a gateway for ethnic and religious pluralism.

Growing Numbers of Teachers, Administrators, and Staff Who Are Muslim

It bears mentioning that research conducted by Teachers College in the past three years indicates a growing presence of Muslims in the workforce of the Department of Education, including schoolteachers, administrators, and support staff. In focus groups, Muslim educators voiced their frustration in regard to paid holidays. They felt it was unfair that Department of Education employees get paid time off for observed holidays like Good Friday and Yom Kippur, yet they are not given the same rights in regard to the two holiest days in the Islamic calendar. Should they choose to take off for Eid, they are forced to either use up a sick leave day or take a deduction in salary for each day missed. This, in their view, is religious discrimination.

An Emerging Crisis of Civic Belonging

Passage of Resolution 1281 would, in my analysis, help to reverse the growing feeling of social marginalization from mainstream society that many Muslim youth and their families have experienced since the tragic events of 9/11. Survey results and focus groups indicate that Muslim school children have a strong sense of American identity and place as much or greater value toward civic and political participation as do their non-Muslim peers. Yet they are very worried. They believe intolerance is becoming more pervasive in public discourse on main street and they fear this is deligitimizing their American identity. In the classroom they are Americans like everyone else, but in the public square they are getting a very different message.

In a recent Teachers College survey of 330 Muslim high school students, a large majority (69%) thinks that mainstream society is suspicious of them and nearly all of them (90%) feel that discrimination against Muslim Americans has increased since 9/11. Public opinion polling over the past few years bears out this perception.⁵ Compared to non-Muslim students in our survey, a larger percentage of Muslim students place less trust in government and politicians. This is understandable in the post-9/11 climate because many of the students in our study were of South Asian or Arab ancestry and thus have kinship, cultural and historical connections to countries caught up in the US government's "War on Terror." These students judge homeland security policies as unfairly targeting Muslims in general and Arab and South Asian Americans in particular. Another reason for their ambivalence is that they mistrust the news media, which they see as distorting Islam by repeatedly framing its coverage Muslims in the contexts of religious extremism, terrorist violence, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and stereotypes about women.

In both our survey and focus group research, Muslim students expressed fear that the spread of Islamophobia would make them second-class citizens for generations to come. It comes as no surprise then that 64% of the students in our survey think that a Muslim wearing Islamic attire would face discrimination in the workplace. Over a third of the students reported having experienced anti-Islamic or ethnoreligious slurs at least several times in the past 12 months. Twenty-eight percent said that in the past year either they or a close relative was stopped and questioned as a result of racial profiling; turned down for a job (12%); had personal property damaged or destroyed (11%); or physically assaulted (7%). And there was near unanimous agreement that the most ubiquitous and disconcerting form of discrimination is the unfriendly and sometimes hostile stare from strangers in public.

Do Muslim students experience similar levels of bigotry inside their schools? Seventeen percent of the students in our survey reported that something bad happened to them because of their race or religion. This included being teased using the "T-word", terrorist; taunted with ethnic and religious slurs; and ridiculed about an item of clothing, usually a headscarf (hijab) worn by girls.

Not surprisingly, the events of 9/11 and the subsequent domestic policies in the "War on Terror" have had an impact on how Muslim students conceptualize their personal identity and self-worth. A third of the Muslim students (31%) report that 9/11 made them feel uncomfortable about their Muslim identity. And there is growing evidence that some Muslim youth, feeling stigmatized by their Islamic identity, attempt to avert feelings of exclusion by either changing their Muslim-sounding names or passing as members of a

different ethnic group to hide their religious identity. Our survey found that a third of the students (29%) have used a non-Muslim sounding name in school, and about 10% admit to having intentionally employed ethnic passing. In bears mentioning that our focus group findings revealed that much more passing occurs than students were willing to admit on our survey. Students described remaining “closeted” about their identity, simply allowing other students or teachers to incorrectly presume they were either white, Hispanic, Italian, black or some other ethnicity.

Despite these examples of intolerance and discrimination, Muslim students overall do not harbor negative feelings toward their schools. On the contrary, our study found that 8 out of 10 students think their schools are “pretty cool” with 85% saying they feel safe, and a majority are satisfied with the quality of teaching and fairness of school discipline. And despite their cynicism of American politics and government because of widespread Islamophobia, Muslim students overwhelmingly expressed positive attitudes towards all conventional forms of American civic and political participation. Nine out of 10 Muslim students thought that civic and political engagement—from volunteering for community service, to keeping informed of current events, voicing opinions to the media and elected officials, and voting—are important democratic values. Six-in-10 Muslim students we surveyed—slightly more than non-Muslim students—reported that they volunteer for community service at least several times a month. One-in-4 Muslim students has written either to an elected official or a newspaper, and a third of them, compared to one-quarter of the non-Muslim students, have taken part in a protest rally, and nearly 90% said they would vote when they reach legal age.

The Recurring Failure of Existing Accommodations

Even though the city is now more careful to avoid scheduling standardized citywide tests on Muslim holidays, as it regrettably did several years ago, this does not eliminate the dilemma facing children and their families about missing school to observe Islamic holidays. It does not prevent individual schools or teachers at the local level from administering major assessments like exams, projects and presentations and threatening to fail any student who is absent. This problem is particularly acute for students in high school who are worried about getting into a college of their choice. We have documented such incidents in our focus group research with students and educators. This problem is further compounded by the fact that not only are most students and their families unfamiliar with the specifics of the educational law regarding release time for religious observance and instruction, but so are teachers and even some assistant principals.

Much more needs to be done to help educate teachers about cultural traditions associated with the Eid holidays that sometimes result in misunderstandings, frustration and embarrassment. In our focus groups, for example, we heard of stories of students risking truancy by actually sneaking out of school and rushing to their local mosque for the Eid prayer, and then hurrying back to class still wearing their holiday outfits. In another example, a girl came to school with fancy henna designs on her hands—a holiday custom in many Islamic cultures—and was reported to the administration by an alarmed teacher who thought that the girl had suspicious looking “cuts” on her wrists.

The passage of Resolution 2181 is what is needed. While eliminating the recurring problem of scheduling conflicts, it would also create an opportunity for all students, teachers, guidance counselors, administrators and others to learn about Islamic traditions instead of reproducing the ignorance that now exists, and the confusion and often unintended discrimination that it causes.

Conclusion

By adopting Resolution 1281 the New York City Council can bring the city's slate of observed school holidays, unchanged since the early 1960s, into the new millennium. As reported by the New York City Planning Department, from 1970 and 2000, "the total foreign-born population nearly doubled, from 1.44 million to 2.87 million, while the share of Europeans dropped from 64 percent to 19 percent."⁶ Over a third of these "new immigrants" were non-Christian: Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and others.⁷ Simply put, the religious diversity of New York City today no longer fits the picture of urban America in the 1950s that Will Herberg described in his important book, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An essay in American religious sociology*.

The passage of Resolution 1281 is not only warranted but urgently needed, for it would initiate the reversal of what appears to be a growing crisis of uncertainty in both the religious and civic identities of American Muslim youth. Passage of Resolution 1281 can go a long way toward averting what one Muslim commentator calls the psychological ghettoization of American Muslims. Moreover, it would begin to repair the fading confidence that Muslim youth and their families have in government and politicians, plus it would go a long way toward educating the larger public about the fallacy in the Islamophobic assumption that American Muslims disdain integration and engagement in the American public square.

By thus passing Resolution 2181, the city and the public schools will be acting with due diligence, equality and justice toward reaffirming the rights of Muslim children, all 120,000 of them, to the free exercise of religion that they and their families must no longer be denied.

¹ A precise enumeration of religious affiliation for any faith-group in the United States is impossible because of federal restrictions on the US Census regarding religion. Nonetheless, academic surveys conducted since the 1990s suggest that the present Muslim population in the US is approximately 5-7 million, a figure generally accepted by most experts studying Muslim Americans. The population estimate of 700,000 Muslims in New York City is based on extrapolations of ancestry and country of origin data from immigration and US Census records from 1990 to 2000, and combined with recent demographic studies on Mosque affiliation suggesting that at least 1 in 10 Muslims in the US resides in New York City. An early estimate of 600,000 published in Cristillo and Minnite undercounted African-American and other non-foreign born Muslims. Estimates of the African American Muslim population by religious leaders suggest a number between 120,000 to 150,000. See Ilyas BA-Yunus and Kassim Kone, "Muslim Americans: A Demographic Report," in Zahid Bukhari, Sulayman S. Nyang, Mumtaz Ahmed and John Esposito, eds., *Hopes, Fears, Aspirations: Muslims in American Public Life*. 2003. Alta Mira Press. See also, Ihsan Bagby, Paul M. Perl, and Bryan T. Froehle, *The Mosque in America: A National Portrait*. 2001. Washington, D.C.: Council on American-Islamic Relations; and "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream," Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2007 (<http://pewforum.org/surveys/muslim-american/>)

² Tony Carnes and Anna Karpathakis (eds) *New York Glory: Religions in the City*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2001)

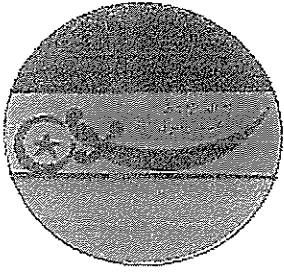
³ This estimate was calculated by taking 17%--the percentage of school-aged children in New York City according to the US census bureau, of the estimated population number of the City, 700,000. See: <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/36000.html> ,

⁴ The online magazine, Education Week, reported that in 1998, a suburban Cincinnati school district decided to make Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the official school holidays. The superintendent of the 6,100-student district said that adjustments to the calendar for the Jewish holidays were made on educational grounds, noting that it was unproductive to have classes because between 15 percent and 21 percent of students were absent on those days the previous school year. See: <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/1998/09/23/03jewish.h18.html>

⁵ In post-9/11 America, draconian national security measures, coupled with a readiness to accept the simplistic allure of the “Clash of Civilizations” thesis, have ushered in a new round of American nativism. Islamophobia is worse now than it was in the first few months after 9/11 when Muslims were facing a national backlash. A recent Washington Post-ABC poll, coinciding with the start of the fourth year of the War in Iraq, revealed that 46 percent of those surveyed—up 7 percent from just after the 9/11 attacks—expressed unfavorable views toward Islam and regard Muslims to be disproportionately prone to violence. See also polling done by Pew Research at <http://pewforum.org/docs/index.php?DocID=30> , and CBS News Poll of April 12, 2006, “Poll: Sinking Perceptions Of Islam,” at: <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/04/12/national/main1494697.shtml> , accessed September 23, 2008.

⁶ From the New York City Department of Planning website: http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/census/nny_exec_sum.shtml , accessed September 23, 2008.

⁷ Eck, Diana L. 2001. *A New Religious America*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.



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THE MOSQUE OF ISLAMIC BROTHERHOOD INC.
130 West 113th Street, New York N.Y. 10026
(212) 662-4100

September 26, 2008

STATEMENT TO THE CITY COUNCIL BY IMĀM AL-HĀJJ TĀLIB 'ABDUR-RASHĪD

Ladies and Gentlemen of the City Council:

Peace be unto you all – Shalom Aleichem, As-salaamu –'Alaikum. On behalf of the congregation of the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood, which is located in Council member Dickens' Harlem district, and also on behalf of the Majlis Ash-Shura of New York, also known as the Islamic Leadership of this great state in which we live, I want to express my thanks to the Almighty that once again the City Council of New York has been granted the opportunity to exercise leadership in a unique and critical area of human relations.

Sixteen years ago in 1992, I had the honor of speaking before those who then constituted this august body, in calling for the amendment of city legislation governing the determination of alternate side parking regulations. At that time I stated " Now is the time for you to make a bold statement in favor of a multi-cultural, pluralistic society." The Council, seeing the wisdom and importance of a dramatic acknowledgment of the evolved demographic of the greatest city in the country and one of the greatest in the world, saw fit to pass the legislative amendment, and now the suspension of alternate side parking for Eidul-Fitr and Eidul-Adha is part of New York City's way of life.

This critical demonstration of leadership and cultural competency had a ripple effect on other cities and states, in that observance of the major Muslim holy days became publicly recognized as socially acceptable and religiously necessary, in today's world. This recognition began to be extended to the public school system of different states.

Today in the Tri-State area, the New Jersey cities of Trenton, Paterson, and Atlantic City, all have these two major Muslim days of worship on their holy day calendars. Other states such as Michigan and Massachusetts in the city of Boston have followed suit. A trend which began in New York is spreading to other parts of the country and appropriately so.

This year for the first time, the city of Plainfield, N.J. is closing its schools for the same reason. There, District Information Officer Eric Jones has stated publicly, "We believe in celebrating the diversity of our students, staff, parents and community, and we are excited to embrace this holiday... "I think it's a testament to what the Plainfield Public Schools is all about ... (OVER)

— we believe in celebrating who we are." Reportedly, there are between 300,000 and 350,000 Muslims, nearly 4 percent of the New Jersey's population of approximately 8.7 million people, whose children attend school in that state. During the course of the day, you will hear of our own city's relevant statistics. But it must be stated that there various sources of public information, including the NYC Police Department, cite the number of Muslims living in our city as at least 850,000. They are all of all ethnic groups, both indigenous and immigrant in origin, and as Chancellor Joel Klein stated at the

Islamic Cultural City of New York, at E. 96th Street and Third Avenue, several years ago, the overwhelming majority of Muslim children living in New York City, attends public schools.

So this is a matter of great importance to Muslim children, who stand to benefit from the achievement of a degree of what the founding imam of the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood, the late African American religious leader, Ash-Shaykhul-'Allaama Al-Hajj K. Ahmad Tawfiq (May Almighty God have mercy on him) identified as a need for the "psychological terra-firma" afforded by public affirmation of one's way of life. Again as I stated to your predecessors, the moral and ethical worth of such public leadership is immeasurable.

It is also important for every citizen of New York, which continues to benefit from the vision and courage of leaders such as you as those of the City Council of past years, who reject the politics of Islamophobia, and do not hesitate to act in the best interest of all of us, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or religion. Once again we call upon you to act in a decisive manner, and vote for amendment of the Department of Education's calendar, to include the Muslim holy days of Eidul-Fitr and Eidul-Adha.

Thank You

Good morning. My name is Imam Bayram Mulic. I want to thank you Councilmembers and especially you, Councilmember Jackson for your leadership and support in putting on these hearings.

I am an Imam at the Islamic Unity Cultural Center, which is a cultural center and mosque located in Astoria; Queens for the last 16 years in District 22, Councilmember Peter Vallone's district where I also live.

Thousands of Muslims from the Eastern European and other communities are congregants of our mosque and are active in our cultural center. Our congregants came here in the 1970's and in the 1980's fleeing persecution in places like Bosnia because they are Muslim. In America, they have made their lives, have become citizens, vote and have children born and raised in this country.

Every year, hundreds of parents in our mosque come to me during Eid and ask me to write letters to their children's principals asking to excuse them. Parents worry that their child will get in trouble or get an unexcused absence so they ask me to write letters. I get so many requests from parents that I've actually developed forms to fill out for families because it's too much to write individual letters.

I myself have 4 children and I know that if we gave the Eids as official school holidays, Muslim youth born and raised in this country will feel even prouder to be New Yorkers and more accepted in the post 9/11 society that they are now growing up in. There would be increased tolerance and understanding among children and everyone in NYC if the Eid holidays become officially recognized in schools. I urge you to pass Resolution 1281. Thank you.



FOR THE RECORD

Testimony in Support of Resolution 1281
Helena Wong, Program Director
CAA AV Organizing Asian Communities, Chinatown Tenants Union
September 26, 2008

I am here in support of New York City school closures on the holidays of Eid-UI-Fitr and Eid-UI Adha.

School closures on Eid-UI-Fitr and Eid-UI Adha would not affect the school calendar in any way. Currently religious holidays recognized as school holidays in the New York City Public School system are Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Good Friday, Passover, and Christmas.

It is very clear that there is a need an urgent need for the recognition of the Eids in New York City. These factors include the significant population of Muslim families in New York City, the importance of the Eids in the Muslim religion, the atmosphere of misunderstanding and fear towards the Muslim community in New York City, and New York City's responsibility to engage itself proactively in encouraging tolerance. Muslims make up about 12% of the student population, and from their experience it has been difficult to get their absences excused.

As the director of the Chinatown Tenants Union of CAA AV, I am here representing my organization in support of this resolution because Muslim students have already experienced great difficulty in getting their absences excused, because it is important for Muslims to be with their families and community on these holidays, because the needs of the Muslim community should be recognized just like the needs of other faiths are recognized through public school closure, and because New York City can benefit from learning about why Muslim students celebrate the Eids to be a more tolerant City of different faiths, religions, and beliefs.

FOR THE RECORD

Hi my name is Sharzina Halim...and I'm a graduate of Curtis High School in Staten Island. As someone that has gone through the public school system, every Eid has been a struggle between celebrating Eid with my family and going to school.

When I was a junior at Curtis, I was forced to make this very decision in my hardest year of high school -- SAT's, AP classes, and the need for perfect grades. I had to make a choice between taking a test for an AP class or staying home to celebrate with my family. I told my teacher about it, but because it fell during finals that year, she just said "Either you take this test or you'll fail the class." I don't know if he even understood it or was listening to mehe was pushing me to decide. It was like a life or death situation.

When I told my parents, they said "Do what you think is right. School is first, it is your life and your future." I had to go to school. I was so aggravated that there was only one real choice. The teacher would not help me.

So, I went to school on Eid to take the test, and went home right after the test. It's really unfair because Eid is a holiday that you want to spend with family and friends. I had relatives coming from other countries and other cities -- everyone was coming to our house. My mother was stressed out cooking for everyone. She works overtime and she needs me there. I am the eldest daughter and it is my responsibility to help out. This is supposed to be a happy, joyous, and exciting day. Instead, it turned out to be disappointing and tiring.

This resolution is important to me, because I don't want other people to hear what I heard from my teacher. They shouldn't have to choose. Even if you can get the day off as an excused absence, if you have school that day you will still have other priorities to juggle.

I also have a sister and all my cousins in the public school system -- they all talk about what they are going to do on Eid...they get so excited. They shouldn't have to worry about what homework they have to do or what test they have to take...I don't want the thousands of Muslim students in New York to hear what I heard.

It also important to me, because I want the Muslim community to be a more visible and respected part of the New York community. Passing this resolution would be a large step towards that goal. In school, my friends and I often get picked on and called Bin Ladin, Terrorist, or Saddem Hussian. I think having Eid off will not only help students, but also the larger New York City community, to better understand Muslims and appreciate them for who they are and where they come from.

TESTIMONY BEFORE
THE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION OF
THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
THE COUNCIL CHAMBERS
CITY HALL, NEW YORK, NY 10007
Friday, September 26, 2008

Good morning Chairman Robert Jackson, Honorable members of the committee (Maria del Carmen Arroyo, Bill de Blasio, Simcha Felder, Lewis A. Fidler, Helen D. Foster, Daniel R. Garodnick, Vincent Ignizio, Melinda R. Katz, G. Oliver Koppell, Jessica S. Lappin, John C. Liu, Domenic M. Recchia, Jr., James Vacca, Peter F. Vallone, Jr., Albert Vann, and David Yassky) on Education. My name is Maf Misbah Uddin, I am the President of Local 1407 – Accountants & Actuaries of the City of New York and the Treasurer of the District Council 37 with 125,000 members and 60,000 active retirees – the union that runs this city that we all love and care about. I am also a member of the Steering Committee as a Vice-Chair of the Municipal Labor committee (MLC) and a member of the International Executive Board of the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA), a constituent group of the AFL-CIO. Above all, I as a Muslim American, while raising five children with the last one still in public school, served the entire community of 42,000 people voluntarily for over 12 years on the Board of Directors in the capacity as Treasurer and then as President of the Parkchester South Condominium in the South Bronx.

I am thankful to this committee for holding this hearing and feel honored as a strong supporter of Resolution Number 1281 which calls upon the New York City Department of Education to incorporate the two most important Muslim holidays, Eid ul-Fitr and Eid ul-Adha, as observed school holidays in the school calendar for the city school district of the City of New York; and calling upon the State legislature to pass and the Governor to sign into law, A-6589/S-3142, an Act to amend the education law, in relation to requiring that Eid ul-Fitr and Eid ul-Adha be school holidays in the city school district of the City of New York.

Eid ul-Fitr often abbreviated to Eid, is a Muslim holiday that marks the end of Ramadan, the Islamic holy month of fasting where Muslims are required to fast from dawn to dusk during the month. Needless to say, after accomplishing such a feat children and adults alike are ecstatic and proud to have carried out these traditions that emphasize the value of community, charity, and discipline so, a celebration is in order. Eid is therefore a festival and anybody will tell you that without the jovial and heartwarming presence of the youth, there can be no real celebration. More detrimentally, however, we can not expect the foremost Islamic value of helping the community especially financially to be promulgated amongst the children of tomorrow and their grandchildren.

The second Eid, **Eid-Ul-Adha** is the Hajj, or Pilgrimage as it has become known in the West. For over 1400 years, Muslims from all over the world, visit Makkah every year, to perform the Hajj and must slaughter a lamb or other suitable animal, in commemoration of Prophet Ibrahim's act of obedience to the LORD, the creator. All those away from Hajj also perform the sacrifice based on their financial ability. One must distribute one third to the poor and needy and share one third with their neighbors. Children take part in this teaching learning to help those who are helpless, to show mercy to those around you so that the Lord may show mercy unto you. These are the ideals that not only Muslim adults should hold paramount, but also the rest of our children who should have the opportunity to be instilled with such humanitarianism as the world struggles through one violent war after another, breeding disunity and hatred.

As a whole, these two Eid holidays are the most joyous occasions, similar to Christmas in its celebration and with the same intensity of religious significance, celebrating the achievement of absolute devotion to the most important ideals of Islam, and turning the aforementioned idealist principles into action. It is a day of forgiveness, moral victory and peace of congregation, fellowship, brotherhood and unity. Muslims celebrate not only the end of fasting but also by thanking God for the self control and strength God gave them. It is a time of giving and sharing, and the giving of a special charity for this occasion is obligatory.

It's important for Muslims to be with their families and community on these holidays. It is customary that the parents give money to a child of theirs to put in the charity box at the mosque. Prior to the start of the Eid ul-Fitr prayer, every Muslim must pay Zakat Ul-Fitr which comes at the end of the holy month of Ramadan which is obligatory on every person. Be it poor or rich, man or woman, sane or insane. It is mandatory for each person to pay this zakat. The amount of this zakat must be enough to feed a poor or needy person. It is a tradition that is handed on to ensure that our children hold fast to this ever-significant ideal of helping the community over the self. Shouldn't we make sure that traditional values such as community, brotherhood and taking care of the impoverished and less fortunate be among those that our children carry with them through these turbulent times and looking forward, make the world a better place than we did?

Sadly enough, that same child is missing a day of school because of who he/she is and the inevitably harsh dichotomy that is forced upon them due to existing legislation. Currently, Regulation of the Chancellor, Number: A-630, RELIGIOUS ACCOMMODATION OF STUDENTS, Issued: 02/19/03 allows absences on the day. Are there any other options? While Muslim students are supposed to be given excused absences, in practice, they are missing out on important lessons, and often get marked absent, affecting their attendance records.

Approximately 12% of our public school's population is Muslim. The children's psyche growing up in America, whose constitutional values sound more like appreciation for each religion than tolerance, is that my American education and my religion cannot and should not coincide. The values I've been taught such as giving to the poor and putting my community before myself are dichotomous in relation to education, and science and mathematics. Why draw that line, when these values are necessary for any society to flourish hand in hand no matter the differences in creed?

These factors should be of utmost consideration to whom it may concern as Islam is the fastest growing religion from a local to a global scale. Senator Hillary Rodman

Clinton, then first lady, stated a decade ago that, "Islam is the fastest-growing religion in America, a guide and pillar of stability for many of our people..."(Los Angeles Times, May 31, 1996, p.34).

Michael Kress, graduated from the Harvard Divinity School, states that considering the dramatic changes in America's religious makeup, it makes sense that a growing number of Muslim school children are experiencing opposite emotions. They are forced to choose on their holy days between school or religious observance. And their parents resent it with the number of Muslims in America estimated to be around 6 million.

It's very important for Muslim children to be with their families and community on these Eid holidays. On the day of the celebration, a typical Muslim family, awakes very early and are encouraged to dress in their best clothes, new if possible or clean if old. They then attend special congregational prayers held in mosque, large open areas, stadiums and arenas. Children are given gifts or money by their parents and relatives according to their ability and means. Also, women (particularly mothers, wives, sisters and daughters) are normally given special gifts by their loved ones. Through out the day Greetings of "Eid Mubarak," or "a blessed 'Eid" are exchanged, to further entrench this theme of unity and brotherhood.

It is meant as a joyous occasion in which glad tidings are to be brought to anyone and everyone encountered publicly or privately. It is, in essence, a day of commemoration of the values that are understood as paramount from the Abrahamic tradition of old. It is a day in which nothing is of greater priority than brotherhood with one's community members and neighbors. It is just like the Bible says and Koran reaffirms, that in order to love God, you must first love thy neighbor. Both Eids are devoted stringently to embody this parable in its totality.

Haverford College political scientist Harvey Glickman stated during a recent presentation that various population studies now show that Muslims represent the largest

non-Christian religious group in the United States. Closing schools is inevitably taken as a sign of communal priorities, values and self-identification. "It is recognition of religious diversity and a sign of respect for people's faith to acknowledge a religion's seminal day of the year or a religious holiday by closing schools," says Shirin Sinnar of the American Muslim Council. Schools must figure out how to accommodate these needs or justify their decisions not to. Our schools, clearly, have an opportunity to show Muslims that America truly is a land for all people, regardless of their faith. And someday, perhaps, their children will walk to mosque on Eid, marveling at the sight of their schoolmates playing on their day off.

The Main Line Reform Temple-Beth Elohim member made his remarks during a lecture last week at La Salle University titled "The Challenges Facing Muslim Americans Since 9/11 – The Political Context." He said that American Muslims -- the majority of whom are not Arab, but hail from South Asia or are African-American -- are going through an assimilation process, complete with certain discrimination, similar to what Jews and Catholics before them experienced. "Muslims are a large and growing minority in the United States, and they will probably begin to assert their interests. The larger they are, the more people have to pay attention," Glickman explained in an interview following his talk.

Steven Greenhouse of the New York Times reported on August 6, 2008 that the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), representing 100,000 members in the U.S. and Canada and Tyson Foods of Shelbyville, TN have reached an agreement to increase the number of paid days off for workers with the Muslim observance Eid al-Fitr or Personal Holiday (upon employee's request) as paid holidays for workers in the Shelbyville poultry processing plant. "The union is pleased that the will of the workers in Shelbyville to observe and celebrate Eid al-Fitr will be guaranteed as a paid holiday," said Stuart Appelbaum, national president of the RWDSU. "We in the labor movement have always understood that unions are only strong when we work to protect the dignity of all faiths, and that includes Muslims," said Mr. Appelbaum, who also serves as president of the Jewish Labor Committee.

Islam has not just recently started making its mark in the Americas it has always been part of its original fabric. I was surprised as I am sure most of the readers would also be, to learn that according to some sources, Muslims had reached North America even 300 years before Christopher Columbus is credited with having discovered it. Even researchers say that Christopher Columbus had logged on October 21st, 1492 in his diary the sighting of a mosque in Cuba during his voyage to America. He also logged that remnants of other mosques had been found in Mexico, Texas and Nevada. According to Fareed Nu'man (American Muslim History - A Chronological Observation, 2002) the earliest known references to Muslims having reached the shores of America date back to the latter part of the 12th and the early part of the 14th Century.

In 1530 the First slave ships landed in America. Many slaves in early trade came from places where Islam was practiced. It is believed that more than 30 percent of the 10 million people sold into slavery in the United States were Muslim. From 1530 to 2008, 478 years have gone by. Then and now we are witnessing a different world order. With increased political awareness of the Muslims and the realization that they can also make their votes count they now have the confidence to participate in US national affairs unlike their previous abstinence for generations. According to various reports, over 70% of the Muslims in the USA feel that they should, as a community, be involved in US institutions and should also participate in the political activities at the state as well as the national levels.

In addition and recognition of this important fact, an increasing number of school districts around the country, including communities in New Jersey (Irvington, Atlantic City, Paterson, Cliffside Park, Prospect Park, and Trenton), and Michigan (Dearborn and Dearborn Heights) have incorporated these holidays into the calendar with no detrimental effects on the overall school calendar. Granting the day off to all students will raise awareness about how important these holidays are to New York's Muslim community, and make a statement that the Muslim community is an important and accepted part of our great City.

New York City is home to over 700,000 Muslims with over 120,000 Muslim students in the New York City public school system. By recognizing Eid-UI-Fitr and Eid-UI-Adha as official public school holidays, our City too can ensure that Muslim students do not continue to face problems of religious accommodation in the public school system on their faith's holiest days, and that the paramount Abrahamic principle of neighborly and communal philanthropy is not further forsaken.

Ladies and Gentleman of the Council I am grateful for your time to allow me to contribute to this very important discussion. If you have any questions I will be happy to answer them.

Testimony
of

Amina Rachman
Special Assistant to the President
United Federation of Teachers

before the

New York City Council Education Committee

on

Resolution on the Muslim Holidays

September 26, 2008

City Council Res. No. 1281 (Muslim Holidays)

The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) respects and celebrates diversity – the diversity of our student population, the diversity of our membership and the diversity reflected in the staffing of our city’s public schools. The mixture of cultures, ethnicities and religions so evident in our schools is one of the characteristics for which our city is famous. In the schools the diversity can be a marvelous tool to help prepare our children for future study and work in the global landscape. We are truly an international city and our schools are a multicultural microcosm of the world.

Because we respect the religious diversity represented in our schools, we recognize that students have the right to observe the special days on their religious calendars. We join in support of the students, parents and educators who are seeking a way to incorporate Muslim holidays into the existing school calendar. We understand that all parties will need to work together to find common ground and fit these holidays into the calendar.

We are pleased that the Department of Education values and promotes an atmosphere where religious observances can be accommodated; the current guidelines contained in Chancellor’s Regulation A-630 reinforce the importance of commemorating these days. The UFT is asking the City Council to continue to advocate for our children and their families. No child should have to choose between maintaining religious family traditions and being successful in school. The UFT is willing to sit down with all of the stakeholders in this discussion to look for a reasonable solution that supports our Muslim students and families while maintaining the educational standards set by the State Education Department.

Good morning Councilmembers, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Fadila Mrkulic. I have been a member of 32BJ for 36 years and am very active in my union. I am also a member of NYCPP. I stand here before you this morning to testify about the Muslim School Holidays resolution and encourage you to support it.

I live in Astoria, Queens and I am a constituent of the great Councilmember Peter Vallone. There are hundreds and hundreds of my fellow union members living in Astoria that support this campaign.

I would like to tell you today about my story being a Muslim, a 32BJ member and how much the Eid holiday means to me personally and to my family. I came to this country 37 years ago from Bosnia. The Eid holiday means what Christmas means here. Families get together, celebrate and worship together. So, when I first came to this country, I would get so excited weeks before the Eid holiday. But I realized very soon that celebrating Eid here would be very difficult because my husband and children couldn't stay home for Eid. I would cry because I would stay up all night to prepare the house and cook all night, but in the morning everyone had to leave. I could not simply be with my kids and celebrate that day. It felt empty because I could not be with my kids on Eid.

I have 4 kids, all of whom went to public schools in NYC. My kids would come to me every holiday, Mom why can't we stay home like my friends? Why can't we celebrate together? Sometimes I would let my kids stay home on Eid, but then I would hear from the school who told me I had to send my kids to school. I stopped and gave up and told my children they had to go to school and that we would wait until the weekend to celebrate.

Let me tell you something, though: I am very grateful for my union because, in my union, we have Eid off. I remember that one day, the day before the Eid holiday, my supervisor actually came to me and shook my hand and said to me, "Have a great holiday tomorrow, Fadila." That gave me tears in my eyes because it made me feel, "Wow, this is America. Here I am equal." Next week, it will be Eid again and I can stay home. God bless my union and my President Mike Fishman that gave us this opportunity.

I hope dear Councilmembers that you can see it in your heart and soul to also give the holidays to our children. Even though my children didn't have the opportunity to be with their family, I hope the hundreds of thousands of other parents in NYC don't have to be without their kids on Eid in the future. We are not asking for financial assistance, we are not asking for anything that's difficult to do, we are just asking our kids to be home with us on this holiday. Even though my kids have graduated and are now older, I want other kids and their families to be able to not worry. Please pass this Resolution and make a statement, like many other cities, that we value the diversity of NYC and the Muslim community.

**Testimony to City Council Education Committee
Muslim Holidays Campaign**

**Submitted by Rabbi Michael Feinberg
Executive Director
Greater New York Labor-Religion Coalition**

September 26, 2008

Thank you Chairperson Jackson for convening these hearings and for giving me the opportunity to testify here today. I am Rabbi Michael Feinberg, a member of the steering committee of the Muslim Holiday Coalition, and executive director of the Greater New York Labor-Religion Coalition, interfaith worker rights and economic justice advocacy organization with members in all five boroughs of the city.

I am here today representing our network of more than seven hundred religious leaders and their congregations across the city, drawn from many diverse faith traditions—Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and others. As a Coalition, we strongly support the full civil and religious rights of the Muslim community here in New York City, a large, growing and vital community, both immigrant and native born.

We believe that an essential part of this equality consists in the formal recognition of the two principle Muslim holidays—Eids—by the Department of Education as official school holidays. Muslim students in the public school system should not have to choose between full participation in their own education and observance of their religious faith, holidays and rituals. No such choice is asked of Jewish or Christian students. This is a matter of simple justice and equity, one that is important to religious community leaders regardless of their own faith.

In New York, our single greatest asset is the diversity of our residents and communities—both ethnically and religiously. As a city we need to affirm and respect this diversity and reflect it in our City laws and regulations. The inclusion of the Muslim holidays in the alternate side of the street-parking calendar—the semi-official calendar of the city—was the first step.

The next step is for the City Council and the Mayor's office to extend this principle of full inclusion and respect to the tens of thousands of Muslim students under the umbrella of the Department of Education. As religious community leaders we urge you to do so with due promptness.

Thank you very much.



86-17 105th Street
Richmond Hill, NY 11418-1597
Telephone (718) 847-6764
FAX (718) 847-7392
e-mail: info@QueensChurches.org
www.QueensChurches.org

The Rev. N. J. L'Heureux, Jr.
Executive Director

Statement of
The Reverend N. J. L'Heureux, Jr.
September 26, 2008
to the Education Committee
New York City Council
In Re: Resolution No. 1218

I am the Reverend N. J. L'Heureux, Jr. For the past 30 years I have been privileged to serve as the Executive Director of the Queens Federation of Churches, the ecumenical council of Christian Churches in the Borough of Queens. It counts as participants over 390 congregations affiliated with all of the Christian denominations and many independent churches. Before being called to the Federation position in 1978, I served as pastor of the Maspeth United Methodist Church in Maspeth, Queens.

As a member of the Christian Clergy and a leader of the religious community here in New York City, I am here this morning to voice strong support for Council Resolution 1218 and its underlying purpose – the creation of two public school holidays for members of the Islamic Faith.

There are many reasons for this:

- It advances religious liberty by removing a government-created burden on religious practice.
- It promotes the values of our American society of immigrants by welcoming and affirming the Faith and culture of this growing population in our midst.
- It provides an important “teachable moment” whereby those of us whose Faith and culture are different may be afforded an opportunity to learn about and appreciate the Muslim Faith of our neighbors.
- And, for those who may not be persuaded to travel the high-minded road, we must also recognize that absences on school days – even excused absences – result in a loss of State Education funding to the New York City Public School. Failing to do the right thing here, results in a fiscal penalty that affects adversely all of the children in our public schools.

For nearly a quarter century, I have been an active member of the Committee on Religious Liberty of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. I have served as the staff Moderator of that Committee since the year 2000. I am both keenly aware of and passionately committed to the bedrock principles of religious liberty enshrined in our Nation’s charter. It is wrong both as a matter of law and equity to prefer some religions over others. It is especially wrong to put the adherents of any Faith to the

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choice between obedience to the requirements of their Faith, on the one hand, or the receipt of a government benefit on the other. The matter has been litigated extensively in the area of Sabbath observance (one cannot be forced to work on the Sabbath in exchange for unemployment benefits) and, increasingly, in matters of dress and grooming. Here, public school children are forced to choose between their lessons and exams necessary for their education versus faithfulness to their religious commitments.

The holidays of Eid ul Fikr (the Return to Purity on the day following Ramadan) and Eid ul Adha (the Return to Sacrifice, marking the day when hundreds of thousands of faithful Muslims, having made their lifetime Hajj, are surrounding the Kabba in Mecca). On both of these holy days, the faithful are expected to join in corporate prayer in the Mosque in the morning and continue in celebration both congregationally and in family throughout the day.

School children should not be put to the choice between their lessons and their God.

We are a society of immigrants, coming over the past four centuries from many different countries, suffused with many different cultures and worshipping God in many different Faith traditions. Our society has benefitted as each new immigrant takes his or her place beside the older immigrant and learns to break bread together in fellowship. I celebrate the fact that Queens is the most ethnically diverse county in the world and the whole City of New York together shines as a global city. Failing to follow through on legislation urged by this Council Resolution will not only tarnish our image, but it will undermine our principles.

I noted that the official designation of these two Holy Days as public school holidays will be a “teachable moment.” Our public schools are extraordinarily deficient when it comes to helping any of us understand the deepest commitments of our neighbors. In a misbegotten fear of somehow violating the Establishment Clause, our public school system has almost completely excised any reference to Deity, faith or religion (other than a few cases where it is either negative or in virtual caricature). Having the holiday, along side other religious holidays, will provide a good opportunity to have a classroom discussion of the observance and what it means to the members of that Faith. This should be done with Yom Kippur, Passover, Christmas, Easter, and Eid ul Fikr and Eid ul Adha.

I am well aware the Muslim children today can take the holy days off as an excused absence. Beside putting themselves at an educational disadvantage personally in so doing, this puts the whole public school system at a disadvantage because of the loss of State reimbursement. With the growing number of Muslim students in our schools – estimated currently at 12% – this is a costly penalty. Doing the right thing by creating a school calendar when everyone can attend will better enable the schools to do a better job for our children and our society.

Good morning council members, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Elpidio Molina and I am a proud member of 32BJ, NYCPP and CEJ. I live in the Bronx and, like hundreds of other union members, am a constituent of Councilman Koppell. I am here, therefore, to speak not only on my own behalf but also for all the other members of my union who support the Muslim Schools Holiday Campaign. We want to make it clear that we support the efforts made by this city council to recognize and celebrate the diversity of our great city.

As a 32BJ member I'm extremely proud of the fact that our union recognizes Eid. Our union is extremely diverse and the fact that it recognizes and celebrates this diversity only makes our organization stronger. I think that the same would apply for our cities schools and neighborhoods.

Also, I personally, couldn't imagine having to be apart from my family during an important holiday and it pains me that students in New York public schools must make that choice. Holiday's are more than just having the day off work or school. It is about taking time to sit down with your family, to celebrate your heritage and to reconnect with your community. Forcing Muslim students to forgo this is simply unfair.

Additionally, I think that even in areas where the Muslim population is low, students and parents would benefit by seeing that the City of New York recognizes the importance of Eid. It will provide those communities that lack a significant Muslim population with an opportunity to learn about the Muslim community and its contributions to the diversity of New York City. Furthermore, for those who do have Muslim friends, neighbors and co-workers it will only serve to further their understanding and tolerance.

I respectfully ask, therefore, that this committee passes this resolution and takes an important step towards making our whole community a happier and more tolerant family.

Hello, my name is Augusto Pena and I am here to voice my support for the Muslim School Holidays resolution currently before the committee. I am a member of 32BJ and NYCPP. I currently live in the Bronx and am represented by Jame Vacca.

I stand here not only to express my own opinion but also that of my fellow members in 32BJ who couldn't be here today. We all have benefited from being in a Union which puts as a priority the happiness of its members as evidence by the Unions recognition of Eid as a holiday in our contract. I feel that this recognition is important because it shows the members of 32BJ that we are all equal; that every single one of us should be home with their families on important holidays. From my prospective, the formal recognition of Eid has brought all of the members closer together and especially helped us to further strengthen the long-lasting friendships many of us have with our fellow Muslim members of the Union . Recognition of Eid provides a wonderful window into lives of our friends and allows us to share in their excitement and joy.

Additionally, one of the things I love the most about living and working in New York is its diverse nature. It helps me feel more connected to the community and more comfortable in my daily life knowing that New York City makes fostering and celebrating diversity such an important goal. I think that after 9/11 it is even more important that we reach out to the Muslim community and make them feel as accepted and welcomed as the rest of our community. I think passing the Muslim School Holidays Resolution is an important step toward that goal. It sends a signal to not only students but the whole community that the 700,000 Muslims living here in New York City are a valued part of our city.

Therefore, I ask that you pass this resolution and keep students from having to choose between their education and celebrating their faith. Like the union, I feel that this recognition and acceptance will only serve to strengthen our entirely city.

Hi my name is Richard Grande and I am a member of SEIU Local 32BJ. I am a proud member of my union for 20 years. I'm a shop steward in my union and work on various issues for the union and my community. First of all, I want to thank Councilmember Jackson for holding this hearing and spearheading this initiative in the Council.

I am here today testifying on behalf of my union and the 100,000 members strong. Our union, 32BJ, is a very diverse union representing members from over 62 countries that speak more than 27 languages. This includes a large number of Muslim rank-and-file members. In our union's tradition of recognizing the diversity of our great city, our union designates Eid as a paid holiday in our contract. Muslims play an important role in many institutions in our city including participating in their unions, their children's schools, in political work, and organizing work.

I myself am Catholic, but I believe that all children in this city should feel that their culture and tradition are recognized in a positive manner. My son Richie is 3 ½ years old and I would like to see him grow up in a New York City that represents the tolerance and diversity that I teach him about at home. Making the Eids official school holidays will not only benefit the over 100,000 Muslim school children in the public schools, but serves as an important tool in promoting understanding and education about different cultures in NYC.

I grew up in a very diverse neighborhood in NYC and I benefited from my interactions with all kinds of people from different countries and of different faiths. I would want other children to have the same exposure in their public schools. It is very important that children understand and know about major traditions and cultures of other children in their schools.

I think it would only send a positive message to all communities to promote Muslim children being with their families on their holy day. I couldn't imagine my son having to make a choice between going to school to take a test or missing Christmas day with the family. It would only be right if the Muslim children could celebrate their holiday with their families. We hope you would consider this and pass this resolution.

Good morning. My name is Mohammad Salam and I have been a 32BJ member for over 21 years and I am Muslim.

I live in Councilmember Garodnick's district, District 4. There are hundreds of 32BJ members living in this district.

I am here today because I have 4 children – all of them who went through the public school system in New York City. One of my sons is still in middle school and my daughter is attending high schools. We, as a family, still struggle with sending them to school or being with the family and community on Eid.

Eid is important because it is a religious holiday. Traditionally, we all get up in the morning and go to mosque for prayers. In our tradition, we are supposed to be with our family and go to mosque for prayers. For me and my wife, Eid represents a time when our family should be together and share our happiness together.

Please pass this Resolution so that our families can be together and our children feel good about celebrating with us. Thank you.



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137-139 W. 25th Street, 12th Floor

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Tel: (212) 627-2227

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Testimony of Deycy Avitia, Coordinator of Education Advocacy for the New York Immigration Coalition, for the New York City Council Education Committee Muslim Holiday Hearing

September 24, 2008

Good morning. Chairman Jackson and distinguished members of the City Council Education Committee. I am Deycy Avitia, the Coordinator of Education Advocacy for the New York Immigration Coalition, an umbrella policy and advocacy organization for over 200 member groups throughout New York State that fight for justice and opportunity for our newest New Yorkers.

We are here in support of the Muslim Holiday campaign because a high quality education includes recognizing and fostering the unique contributions of different languages, cultures, and religions that make up our schools.

The closing of the New York City public schools on the Eids is important for providing thousands of immigrant and non-immigrant children either the opportunity to celebrate their holidays or an opportunity to learn about the Muslim community and its contribution to the diversity of New York City.

New York City is officially home to over 600,000 Muslims from diversity of backgrounds. However, many consider the unofficial population of Muslims living in NYC at about 1 million. Approximately 12% of our public school population is Muslim.

Given the significant population of Muslim families in New York City, it is necessary that our schools recognize the importance of Eids in the Muslim religion. The reality is that these are important holidays for Muslim families and that children **will** be taking these days off from school to be with their families and communities. While Muslim students are supposed to be given excused absences, in practice, they are missing out on important lessons, and often get marked absent. We know the increasing importance of attendance on school progress, middle and high school admission, and even college opportunities. If New Jersey and Michigan school districts have found a way of honoring these holidays, we as the most diverse city and school district in America, have an obligation to do the same.

Given the atmosphere of misunderstanding and fear towards the Muslim community in New York City, the recognition the Muslim holidays will also provide an opportunity to raise awareness about how important these holidays are to New York's Muslim community, and make a statement that the Muslim community is an important and accepted part of our City. A tolerant community is a prosperous community and recognition of the Eids will increase awareness and tolerance. Thank you.

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THE COALITION FOR ASIAN AMERICAN CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

**New York City Council Education Committee
Hearing on Resolution No. 1281
September 26, 2008**

**Testimony of Choua Vue, Education Policy Coordinator
Coalition for Asian American Children and Families**

Hello, my name is Choua Vue, and I am here on behalf of the Coalition for Asian American Children and Families. CACF is the nation's only pan-Asian children's advocacy group, and we are dedicated to improving the health and well-being of Asian Pacific American (APA) children and families in New York City. CACF works with over 35 community and social service organizations that serve an array of different ethnic communities.

I would like to thank Chairman Jackson and the City Council Education Committee for allowing us to speak on an issue of concern to our community.

CACF is here to **support** Resolution No. 1281.

Background:

- Over 600,000 Muslims reside in New York City with an unofficial estimate of about 1 million.
- In New York City public schools, Muslims are 12% of the school's population.

Need:

- CACF has always supported initiatives that raise awareness among students and staff about the diversity of their schools, especially of Asian Pacific Americans.
- We feel this resolution is one such initiative that will encourage tolerance and respect for all students – regardless of race, ethnicity, and religion.
- Tolerance and respect for diversity will ensure less bigotry, harassment, and ignorance between students and help build a safe learning environment for everyone.
- By incorporating Muslim Holidays in the school calendar, the schools are sending an important message to all students that the Muslim community is an accepted segment of our society.
- This resolution will also allow Muslim students to receive an education with little interruption and to enjoy their religious holiday with their family and community.

For these reasons, we **urge** you to vote in **favor** of Resolution No. 1281.

Thank you again for your time.

Good morning. My name is Imam Bayram Mulic. I want to thank you Councilmembers and especially you, Councilmember Jackson for your leadership and support in putting on these hearings.

I am an Imam at the Islamic Unity Cultural Center, which is a cultural center and mosque located in Astoria, Queens for the last 16 years in District 22, Councilmember Peter Vallone's district where I also live.

Thousands of Muslims from the Eastern European and other communities are congregants of our mosque and are active in our cultural center. Our congregants came here in the 1970's and in the 1980's fleeing persecution in places like Bosnia because they are Muslim. In America, they have made their lives, have become citizens, vote and have children born and raised in this country.

Every year, hundreds of parents in our mosque come to me during Eid and ask me to write letters to their children's principals asking to excuse them. Parents worry that their child will get in trouble or get an unexcused absence so they ask me to write letters. I get so many requests from parents that I've actually developed forms to fill out for families because it's too much to write individual letters.

I myself have 4 children and I know that if we gave the Eids as official school holidays, Muslim youth born and raised in this country will feel even prouder to be New Yorkers and more accepted in the post 9/11 society that they are now growing up in. There would be increased tolerance and understanding among children and everyone in NYC if the Eid holidays become officially recognized in schools. I urge you to pass Resolution 1281. Thank you.