

Fasting in Ramadan

2019 / 1440

May Allah look favourably upon your fasting and answer your prayers!



Guidance for schools when
meeting the needs of Muslim pupils

Advice from Lambeth SACRE

RAMADAN

Meeting the needs of Muslim pupils

"Oh, you who believe! Fasting was prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, that you may become righteous."

Surah Al-Baqarah (The Cow) - Holy Qur'an 2:183

Fasting in the month of Ramadan, the month of revelation of the Holy Qur'an, is an obligation for all Muslims past the age of puberty. There are exemptions from these requirements for some people, such as the sick, those engaging in a long journey, menstruating women, or those who are frail in old age. Exemptions have to be made up later or compensated for, e.g. by fasting on another day or by feeding the poor. Fasting at other times is also encouraged but is non-obligatory.

Fasting is undertaken by Muslims for the sake of Allah, the Creator, the Merciful, the Loving (to mention just three of His names or attributes) and is regarded as an expiation of human failings. It cultivates virtues such as piety, love of God, brotherhood, vigilance, devotion, patience, unselfishness, moderation, thriftiness and satisfaction with what one has, discipline, social belonging, self-control, and compassion for fellow human beings who might suffer hunger and deprivation unwillingly.

Fasting in Islam is not merely denial of food and drink alone. Muslims believe they should also try to restrain their other senses, such as the eye, ears, and particularly the tongue, avoiding backbiting, scandal-mongering, obscenity, confrontation and such matters.

To fast during Ramadan is one of the main requirements of the Islamic faith. Muslims are required to abstain from all food, drink (and sexual activity where appropriate), from dawn to nightfall through the 30 or 29 days between one new moon and the next. The daily fast begins before the time of the Fajr (dawn) prayer and finishes at the time of Maghrib (sunset) prayer.

It is very important for many Muslim families that their children should begin participating in the practice of fasting at an early age. Most children of secondary school age, as they are considered to be adult members of their communities, will be expected to fast. Many primary school children will be fasting as well with younger pupils fasting possibly for part of Ramadan, or only on certain days of each week.

Teachers therefore will appreciate that the routine of Muslim families is entirely different during Ramadan. The whole household will be awake much earlier in the morning and will stay up later at night, particularly when, in 2019, Ramadan falls again in the summer months with long daylight hours. Young children may well become more tired or excitable in school during this time even if they are not fasting themselves. Those students who are fasting may become very tired and thirsty during the school day.

Good Practice Guidelines

Schools are asked therefore to consider the following points in determining their approach to the needs of the Muslim schoolchildren and staff in their care during Ramadan.

Key aspects should be:

- inform and reassure parents /carers in advance how they will support pupils who are fasting, including any special provisions that will be made for pupils who are fasting during Ramadan.
- in primary schools, to establish a register of those pupils who will be fasting, what their fast will involve (e.g. are they abstaining from drink as well as food) and on which days, based on parental permission, given either verbally or in writing. Pupils of secondary age will be expected to fast and it would not therefore be a practical or reliable course of action to attempt to establish a register with them.
- make special provision at lunchtimes for pupils who are fasting but cannot go home. They may want to rest and be quiet or they may enjoy taking part in special activities that can be arranged for them while other pupils are having their lunch. They may also wish to perform prayers at this time, or to share reading the Qur'an with other Muslim pupils or staff.
- ensure that no pupil who is fasting is required to do anything that would make her/him break the fast or become dehydrated or weak. This could include swimming, cross-country running or weight-training.
- anticipate that fasting may make some pupils weak or tired, and adapt the curriculum as appropriate. This could mean, for example, planning less energetic activities in P.E particularly as Ramadan again falls in the hottest time of the year with the longest days.
- where possible, use the fact that pupils are fasting to inform and enrich the curriculum experience both for themselves and others. It could provide a starting point for discussions in a number of subjects, such as religious education, history, P.E., health education, performing arts, geography, science and in collective worship.
- Be sensitive when holding evening events such as parents' evenings, prize -givings etc so that staff and pupils have time to return home to break their fast.

Other Considerations

Prayer facilities:

Many Muslim staff and older Muslim pupils who are fasting may like to have the opportunity to pray at lunchtime. If schools are to meet this need they will have to:

- provide supervised and appropriate rooms that are sensitive to the needs of the participants, where possible one for girls and one for boys if these are not already made available for this purpose throughout the year;
- make available washing facilities and a vessel for washing. Those praying will need to wash their arms and feet which, because facilities are not built for this purpose, may lead to a few puddles on the floor which will need to be cleaned up afterwards;
- allow those wishing to pray to bring prayer mats, and if they wish to, slippers to wear after ablution. Sensitive storage for these items needs to be agreed with those concerned.

Summer Examinations 2019

Students observing the fast will have consumed their last food and drink before dawn and then, during 2019, there will be students across the country taking public examinations during the fast period. Given the importance of hydration for maintaining concentration, it would not be surprising if exam performance was to suffer.

Clearly, if fasting exam candidates are at an unfair disadvantage when they go into their exams with no food or water, the consequences could mean not only lower grades for the individuals but also poorer performance for their school in league tables.

Education providers should seek to reduce any disadvantage by considering how best to support staff and students during periods of fasting that clash with the exam season.

Clare Young, a senior solicitor in the education team at national business law firm DWF said in 2016:

'The Equality Act 2010 gives staff and students protection from discrimination on grounds of specified protected characteristics, including religious or philosophical belief. Therefore, it is unlawful to treat a teacher or pupil less favourably because of their religion or belief, or to apply any provision, criterion or practice (PCP) that disadvantages a particular group without the PCP being a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim. In this situation, PCPs could include any arrangements made for revision or sitting exams, which could arguably place Muslims observing the fast at a severe disadvantage.'

It is highly unlikely that exam boards will consider it practicable to rearrange exam timetables to avoid daylight hours during Ramadan. However, it is understood that talks are taking place between teaching unions, the Joint Council for Qualifications and leading Muslim groups to see if anything can be done to reduce the impact on affected students.

As these arrangements clearly have an impact on a particular religious group, timetabling decisions must be capable of being objectively justified bearing in mind the difficulties of fitting in exams within the wider context of the academic year, including the need to allow time for marking and moderating and ensuring the security of exam questions.'

For other year groups, it may be that internal school exam schedules could be retimed to ensure that students do not have too many exams on the same day, or that special arrangements are made to allow some students to sit certain exams at different times. School plans for other exam arrangements, such as revision sessions and the location of rooms could be reviewed to minimise the impact on those who are fasting.

If students are normally permitted to take food and drink into the exam room with them, it would be considerate where possible to allocate a separate exam room or area for fasting pupils so they are not distracted by others who might have water bottles or snacks on their desks.

Assemblies/Collective Worship:

It is good practice to use collective worship / assemblies to acknowledge and explain about Ramadan. It is also helpful to check that the content of all assemblies during this time is planned sensitively towards pupils who may be feeling weak or hungry.

After school and out of school activities:

Where schools have a high proportion of Muslim pupils, consideration may need to be given to suspending or adapting some extra-curricular activities during Ramadan for practical reasons.

In other schools where the normal programme will be maintained, it is important to ensure that pupils do not suffer in any way through not being able to participate. An example of this would be where 100% attendance at lunchtime practices is required by members of sporting teams.

In planning an annual calendar of out of school visits, it would be sensible to bear in mind the timing of the Ramadan so that one-off special opportunities are not denied to Muslim pupils.

With younger pupils who are not fasting every day it is usually possible to arrange with their families that they do not fast on a particular day so to participate comfortably in an outing.

Celebrating Eid (Id) in school:

Eid-ul-Fitr (Id-ul-Fitr) at the end of Ramadan is a great day of celebration for Muslim families and it is appropriate that schools should mark this time in a special way. Some schools may want to organise events, put up signs, decorate rooms and exchange Id cards.

Absence for Religious Observance:

Schools need to strike a balance between authorised absence for religious observance and excessive loss of school time and may consider the following to be reasonable:

- **Pupils** (*Please bear in mind that many Muslim families mark the occasion of Id for up to three days.*)

A one day authorised absence for religious observance at Eid-ul-Fitr (Id-ul-Fitr) (a 10 day holiday in some Muslim countries) and another at Eid-ul-Adha (Id-ul-Adha), the festival at the time of the annual Hajj Pilgrimage. If parents/carers request further days, then consideration should be given to this. Each case should be considered on an individual basis, looking at patterns of absence and the impact on the overall attendance level.

Please note that the Islamic calendar is subject to the sighting of the new moon, or the news of this from recognised Islamic authorities. Therefore, there is some uncertainty in establishing the date until the last moment. It should also be understood that different Muslims in Britain might follow different days depending on their country of origin or the school of thought they follow.

The register code 'R' should be used for absence authorised when it is due to religious observance. The DfE School Attendance Guidance:

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-attendance>)

states 'The day must be exclusively set apart for religious observance by the religious body to which the parents belong. Where necessary, schools should seek advice from the parents' religious body about whether it has set the day apart for religious observance.'

- **Staff**

Requests for leave from individual members of staff should be treated sympathetically by the Headteacher and governing body.

Communicating with Parents / Carers

It is helpful when the school's policy regarding holidays for religious observance is communicated to parents/carers and included in the school prospectus. Ideally, in advance of Ramadan, all parents/carers of Muslim pupils should receive information about the school's arrangements; either through a letter in English or translation, or a meeting in school. This communication with the home can achieve the following:

- acknowledge the importance of Ramadan and Eid ul Fitr in Islam and show concern for the welfare and education of the child;
- state clearly the position with regard to authorised absence for religious observance and stress the need for parents/carers to ensure that their children are not absent for more days than are authorised;
- outline the special provisions that will be made for pupils who are fasting during Ramadan;
- request confirmation from parents/carers of primary age pupils about whether their child will be fasting during Ramadan, and if so, on which days. Or give parents/carers an opportunity to come into school to discuss how best to decide on which days to allocate fasting and which to avoid;
- give details of any plans for the celebration / marking of Eid in schools;
- seek advance notice of when the pupil is likely to be away from school (see section above 'Absence for religious observance') whilst recognising that Muslims cannot be specific in advance of the information being given by the appropriate Islamic authorities.

Prayer Times for Ramadan

The Islamic calendar is lunar and has 354 or 355 days. Therefore precise dates cannot be forecast as they depend on the sighting of the moon. Ramadan begins on May 5th plus or minus a day dependent on the moon. Prayer times for Ramadan may be found on many mosque websites.

Eid-ul-Fitr (the festival marking the end of Ramadan) falls on 4th June (plus or minus 1 day).