



TASK FORCE ON CULTURALLY INCLUSIVE SCHOOL MEALS AND CALENDARS

FINAL REPORT - SEPTEMBER 2021

“When our school environments reflect the history, values, cultures, and traditions of the communities they serve, our students are better positioned to learn and thrive. The Task Force on Culturally Inclusive School Meals and Calendars will identify best practices in promoting knowledge about religious observances within our schools and explore how school nutrition programs can ensure students have access to meals that suit their dietary constraints and honor their cultural practices.”

— Governor Ralph S. Northam

SCHOOL MEALS

The [Food Research and Action Center \(FRAC\)](#) states that children who participate in school meals programs have lower rates of food insecurity and obesity, better overall diet quality, and greater academic achievement. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical role of school meals in alleviating childhood food insecurity and reinforced the value of offering school meals at no charge to students. However, if students are unable to eat school meals because of cultural or religious restrictions, they cannot reap those benefits. Acknowledgement and celebration of diverse cultures, customs, and cuisines in the lunchroom and classroom supports student achievement and strengthens a sense of belonging to their school communities. The recommendations below support a healthy, compassionate learning environment for students of all backgrounds.

Recommendations for the Commonwealth

- Provide funding for the Virginia Department of Education to create an assessment tool that equips local school divisions and/or individual school communities to gain a greater awareness of students’ customs, cuisines, and cultures and evaluate current practices related to school meals and nutrition curriculum. This assessment would help schools (1) consider the specific religious and cultural needs of their students, (2) determine the extent to which culturally inclusive meals are currently served at school or taught about in the classroom, and (3) identify opportunities for growth. Completion of the assessment would be recommended for each Virginia public school division and could be used by other child nutrition program sponsors. After an assessment is

completed to determine students' needs, analyze current practices, and identify opportunities for change, the strategies below can be used to support implementation.

- Allocate funding to incentivize schools and divisions to develop and implement culturally inclusive school meal practices. An example may be launching a grant-based pilot program to fund one school division in each of the Virginia Department of Education Superintendent's regions that outlines a plan to provide more culturally inclusive meal offerings. This program could begin as a planning grant, and would include incentives for collaboration across regions and dissemination of best practices.
- Charge the Virginia Department of Education and other relevant stakeholders to develop a toolkit of resources linking classroom-based education and the school cafeteria with a specific focus of educating teachers, students, and support staff on the cultural diversity and religious practices of students as well as best practices for creating an inclusive environment in the classroom and beyond.
- Build on established networks including the Governor's Scorecard, Local Wellness Policies, and the School Breakfast Club to integrate culturally inclusive school meals and nutrition education practices.

Best Practices for Local School Divisions and Institutions of Higher Education

- Partner with local organizations, businesses, or faith communities to create and resource culturally inclusive food pantries at schools or institutions of higher education. Additionally, for food distribution to students outside of school meals, ensure that there are culturally inclusive options.
- Partner with student advocates to educate leaders and decision makers on the impacts of non-inclusive meal practices and opportunities to make changes.
- Encourage divisions and institutions to select contractors for vending machines that have options aligned with the diverse religious and cultural food needs of students.
- Engage students and families in the process of changing local policies and center their customs, cultures, and cuisines.
- Encourage educators, faculty, and school leaders to embed food and cultural literacy into curriculum and/or school events. For example, encourage cultural nights, implement special menus to recognize different religious holidays, and make announcements to spread awareness about cultural traditions. Providing students with exposure to different cultures in their community helps cultivate empathy and appreciation of diversity.

SCHOOL CALENDARS

All students, educators, and families should feel a sense of belonging in their schools and institutions of higher education. Religious and ethnic minorities may feel isolated when choosing how to observe a holiday that falls on a school day, especially if their institution does not acknowledge the observances important to their traditions. By proactively and intentionally creating an inclusive academic calendar, PK-12 schools and higher education institutions can foster belonging and equity for all stakeholders.

Recommendations for the Commonwealth

- Create and fund a Governor's Inclusive School Community Award to recognize schools implementing innovative, culturally inclusive school meal and calendar practices. This would be an annual award to highlight exemplary PK-12 schools in each Superintendent's region as well as higher education institutions across the Commonwealth. Small grants will be awarded to winners to advance their policies and practices around culturally inclusive meal and calendars.
- Require each PK-12 school division and public higher education institution to post public policies explaining how they address cultural and religious holidays that fall on school days. Each policy should include a process to collect public input on which holidays are observed in the academic calendar.
- Include content on cultural and religious sensitivity in the required cultural competency professional development for all licensed educators. The added content may contain the following elements:
 - Identity: An appreciation for how the lack of religious recognition may harm students and their families.
 - Religious Practices: Is there a religious leader, or group of leaders, and what is the appropriate term that should be used for this person or group? Is there an established house of worship or gathering space? If so, what is it called?
 - Significant Dates and Times: When are the annual holy days? Do the dates change yearly with the different liturgical calendar? What are the times for formal worship? Are there seasonal celebrations?
 - Religious Dietary Requirements: Know important dietary laws attached to religious traditions. What is not allowed to be eaten? What food is used to celebrate and when is fasting practiced?
 - Liability: An overview of required accommodations that students and others are legally entitled to within the law.
- Fund the development of a cultural and religious sensitivity training for higher education faculty, Boards of Visitors, school boards, parental organizations as well as athletic directors, coaches, and other individuals who are instrumental in supporting the student experience. This training should

be offered at no cost to individuals who support Virginia students throughout the education continuum.

Best Practices for Local School Divisions & Higher Education Institutions

- Collect robust data to determine the prevalence of religious and cultural holidays observed in the school community. For PK-12 school divisions, this could be a component of the assessment tool developed by the Virginia Department of Education.
 - School registration process or “first-day packets” may include voluntary, language accessible, open-ended surveys and questionnaires to gather information related to students’ religious affiliations and practices, including their most significant religious holidays or observances.
 - Schools may consider assessing the community to determine the prevalence of religious institutions, as the quantity may provide insight into the number of families who practice a specific religion. This could include geographic mapping of religious communities.
- Local school divisions may consider the following best practices:
 - Form a Culturally Inclusive School Calendar Committee to consider the most suitable ways to broaden religious observations based on students’ needs. For more detailed guidance, see Appendix I.
 - Develop a guidance manual that includes recommended absence policy for religious and cultural observances.
 - Send out a calendar of holidays and observances to all educators before each semester with encouragement to honor students’ needs when planning syllabi and assignments.
 - School board and local division leadership may consider earlier start dates for the semester, adopting year round models, or reallocating school holidays which do not recognize an important cultural or religious observance to expand capacity to include more diverse religious and cultural observances in their academic calendars.
- Higher education institutions may consider the following best practices:
 - Develop a guidance manual that includes recommended absence policy for religious and cultural observances.
 - Send out a calendar of holidays and observances to all faculty before each semester to help them implement the policy and honor students’ needs when planning syllabi and assignments.
 - Encourage faculty to include a statement in their syllabi about religious and cultural inclusion.

APPENDICES

I. Guidance for Forming a PreK-12 Culturally Inclusive School Calendar Committee

Set Goals & Establish Leadership.

- Identify a division-level representative to chair the Calendar Committee who knows and understands the community.
- Establish a committee with broad representation. Depending on the school or institution, stakeholders should include lead diversity, equity, and inclusion staff, as well as teachers, school leaders, parents, students, religious leaders from a variety of traditions (i.e. Christian, Judaism, Muslim, Hindu, etc.), diverse group of leaders of cultural institutions, legal representation, and community leaders.
- Begin this process seeking religious and cultural awareness to inform the calendar process. The committee may engage the community through focus group meetings with students, families, and religious leaders to determine how they feel about the admission and omission of holidays on the calendar.
- Set clearly articulated goals for optimizing the student experience, maximizing instructional time, and supporting educators with your division leadership that align with your school division's strategic plan.
- Consider working through a tiered decision-making approach guided by demographics and/or values of the school community to support optimizing the student experience, maximizing instructional time, and supporting teachers with the intent of promoting a sense of belonging and supporting student achievement.
 - Examples of different levels of observance may include: School closed for all → professional development day → no tests day → all in school and acknowledge religious observance)

II. Considerations for Local or Institutional Implementation of Recommendations

When new observances are included in academic calendars, please consider the following:

- Conduct preliminary meetings with diverse religious groups to affirm the holiday(s) that will be identified and ensure you have the most accurate name and date of the holiday. Recognize that there are differences within religious traditions about how and when holidays are observed.
- Encourage the school board and superintendent, or Board of Visitors and president, to write a supporting statement for the calendar or policy explaining the rationale and expressing their collective support.

- Ensure that large traditional events including homecoming, family weekend, spring carnivals, graduations, standardized assessments, and other important events do not overlap with major religious holidays.

III. Resources

Culturally Inclusive School Meals

- USDA ["MyPlate" Recipes](#): Recipes that include Asian, Latin American, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Native American, Southern, and Vegetarian.
- USDA [School Meals Seasoned with Cultural Flavors](#)
- USDA Food and Nutrition Service [Multicultural Child Care Recipes](#)
- California Department of Education [Culinary Centers Standardized Recipes - Healthy Eating & Nutrition Education](#): Global recipes and plant based recipes
- [New York City Department of Education Community Meals](#): NYC serves vegetarian, halal & kosher meals in schools.
- Massachusetts Farm to School [Serving Up Tradition: A Guide for School Food in Culturally Diverse Communities](#)

Culturally Inclusive School Calendars

- Virginia Tech's [guidelines](#) from the Dean of Students' Office regarding requesting an excused absence for a religious holiday
- [Coordinating University and Religious Calendars: An Inclusive Practice](#)
- Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities [Calendar of Holidays and Festivals](#) (updated annually)
- [§ 22.1-98. Reduction of state aid when length of school term below 180 days or 990 hours.](#)
- [§ 22.1-79.1. Opening of the school year; approvals for certain alternative schedules.](#) (Effective July 1, 2022)

IV. Task Force on Culturally Inclusive School Meals and Calendars Roster

The Task Force on Culturally Inclusive School Meals and Calendars was chaired by **Secretary of Education Atif Qarni**, supported by **Assistant Secretary of Education Tori Feyrer**, and staffed by **Executive Assistant Hala Al-Tinawi**. Task Force members are listed below.

- **Farah Ahmad** of Gainesville, Community Service, Interfaith, and Government Relations Assistant, McLean Islamic Center
- **Sandra C. Curwood** of Richmond, State Director, Office of School Nutrition Programs, Virginia Department of Education
- **Megan Day** of Catlett, Student and Virginia Future Farmers of America State President
- **Hurunnessa Fariad** of Sterling, Head of Outreach, All Dulles Area Muslim Society (ADAMS Center)
- **Lindsey Fox** of Blacksburg, Interim District Director, Parkway District, Virginia Parent Teacher Association
- **Nina Ha** of Blacksburg, Director, Asian Cultural Engagement Center, Virginia Tech
- **Heidi Hertz** of Richmond, Deputy Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry
- **Qiu Jin** of Virginia Beach, Director, Institute of Asian Studies and Associate Professor of History, Old Dominion University
- **Monica Manns** of Richmond, Chief Equity, Diversity, and Opportunity Officer, Henrico County Public Schools
- **Karishma Merchant** of Alexandria, Senior Education and Workforce Policy Advisor, Office of United States Senator Tim Kaine
- **Sarah Moran** of King George, Registered Dietitian, The Dr. Yum Project
- **Vijay Ramnarain** of Chesterfield, Director of Support Services, Virginia Department of Education
- **Adam Russo** of Manassas, Director, Office of School Food and Nutrition Services, Prince William County Public Schools
- **Lyons Sanchezconcha** of Richmond, Educator, Richmond Public Schools
- **Rabbi Abbi Sharofsky** of Silver Spring, Maryland, Director of Intergroup Relations and Rabbi in Residence, Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington
- **Beth Teigen** of Powhatan, Chief of Staff to the Superintendent, Henrico County Public Schools
- **Jonathan C. Zur** of Richmond City, President and CEO, Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities