

# Washington State: school district promoting Islam is called to account

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The full story is [here](#):

“The second public school district in Washington state in less than a week was warned that it must “cease and desist” its promotion of Islam through its Ramadan policy that gives Muslim students special privileges.

“The Freedom of Conscience Defense Fund (FCDF) sent the superintendent and school board of Northshore School District (NSD) – located in Bothell, Washington, just 30 minutes from Seattle – a “cease-and-desist” letter demanding that officials put an end to their special Ramadan policy or face legal action.

*“FCDF Executive Director Daniel Piedra condemned the policy instructing faculties to make special accommodations for*

*Muslim students during the Islamic holiday season.*

*“The school district’s so-called Ramadan ‘accommodations’ run roughshod over the First Amendment and are a blatant insult to students of other faiths,” Piedra argued in a statement on FCDF’s website. “Under the mantle of ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusion,’ school officials have exalted Islam as the state-sponsored religion. Teachers and parents are outraged, and they should be.”*

*“NSD’s “Diversity & Equity Department” issued school officials its directive to make Muslim students feel comfortable as they receive special privileges not extended to students of other faiths.*

*“[The policy is designed to ensure Muslim students] have the right accommodations and support from teachers and their peers during the Ramadan period,” the district department explained, calling schools to go out of their way to let students conduct their month-long Islamic rituals during Ramadan – which started last week.*

*“An extensive list of ways for teachers to treat Muslim students like a privileged class were outlined.*

*“Plan in advance with Muslim students to allow them to] quietly slip away [for prayer to] avoid calling unwanted attention to them,” the NSD’s Ramadan guidelines read. “When planning school activities and events, think about how it will impact practicing Muslim students [by asking], ‘Will they feel left out? and ‘Will they feel pressured to break their fast before sunset or Iftar (breaking of fast)?’”*

What does this mean? Are the other students to refrain from eating in front of Muslim students, so as not to “pressure” them to break their fast? Should teachers, and non-Muslim students, refrain from mentioning food and drink at all, much less eating or drinking in front of Ramadan observers, in

order to accommodate the delicate sensibilities of Muslim students who might then be tempted to break their fast?

When “planning school activities and events,” the school should not be taking into account, despite the District’s guidelines, how it “will impact” adherents of one particular religion. The schools should remain scrupulously neutral; they should neither promote nor impede any particular religion. No doubt the observance of Ramadan will affect the ability of Muslim students to participate in some events. For example, they might be weakened by their fast and be unable to take part in regularly scheduled athletic classes and, especially, competitions. But that is part of the price they pay for their observance of Ramadan, rather than a reason to change athletic schedules for all. The same is true for academic subjects; they cannot expect to delay test-taking until after Ramadan, for example. That would create problems about possible cheating (if Muslim students take the same test a few weeks later, classmates might tell them the questions in advance) and would constitute “unreasonable” accommodation.

*“In addition, teachers are expected to incorporate teachings of the Islamic faith into their lesson plans.*

What? Only teachings of the “Islamic faith”? This is intolerable. In a public school, to “incorporate teachings of the Islamic faith into their lesson plans” is to favor that faith over all others. This clearly violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. It is especially worrisome because one assumes that if such “teachings” –mainly Qu’ranic verses –will be highly selective, leaving out disturbing verses. Instead, it will include only a handful of misleadingly anodyne verses, such as 2:256 (“There is no compulsion in religion”) and a carefully abridged version of 5:32, that appears to condemn killing, when in fact the full verse sets out when killing is sanctioned. Verse 5:33 describes just how that killing should be done..

*“A brief mention of Ramadan or a lesson on it may promote the feeling of inclusivity [because] many Muslim students may feel embarrassed to be specially accommodated,” the guidelines continue. “Privately offer information about nutritional adaptations [to Muslim students] while they fast during the day.”*

What business is it of the school district to “promote the feeling of inclusivity” for Muslim students? If it truly cared about promoting “inclusivity” for everyone, then it might suggest that a lesson be given about the Qur’anic verse that tells Muslims not to take “Jews and Christians as friends, for they are friends only with each other” (5:51), or about the verse (98:6) that describes non-Muslims as “the most vile of created beings,” verses which certainly prevent inclusivity from the Muslim side. But that, of course, would never happen.

*“And teachers must not be remiss to provide special areas for Muslim students, complete with an assortment of Islamic materials for their reading enjoyment.”*

Why should there be “special areas for Muslim students”? Can’t they attend all of their classes while fasting? How would being sent to special, for-Muslims-only areas help them to observe Ramadan? Or are these “special areas” intended to be places where Muslim students should gather at lunch time, instead of going to the lunchroom, where the sight of food might be too much for them to bear? They ought to be able to handle that glimpse of mystery meat, or pizza, or a tuna salad sandwich, without having to break their fast. And even in the lunchroom, they can sit together with other Muslim students, playing cards or computer games, or even doing some homework. There is no need to set aside another room just for Muslim students to congregate during lunch hours. And why should only “an assortment of Islamic materials” be provided “for their reading enjoyment”? Are teachers now supposed to decide what

constitute “Islamic materials”? This insistence on providing “Islamic materials” clearly promotes Islam and violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. Let the students bring whatever they wish to read at the lunch hour. It’s their business and should not be that of the school district or the teachers.

*“Create] comfortable safe spaces for Muslim students with] books, magazines and other things to keep students busy,” the guidelines direct school officials. “Teachers,] if you are aware of practicing Muslim students in your school and are still unsure about how to support them during Ramadan, don’t hesitate to ask them privately what they need.”*

This is more unconstitutional entanglement with religion. The role of a public school teacher is not “to support [Muslim students] during Ramadan.” Teachers are to avoid privileging one faith above all others. There’s no need to accommodate those observing Ramadan with “comfortable safe spaces” (“safe” in what sense? From the islamophobic stares and teasing of non-Muslim classmates? Is that what the district’s guidelines are implying goes on?) with “books, magazines, and other things.” Students can bring books to read from home, along with the textbooks they routinely carry, and which they can read, or study, during the lunch hour, should they wish. The teachers should not be in the business of making sure everything possible is done so as to lighten the burden of those observing Ramadan. Their task is to remain neutral as to all matters of religion.

*‘FCDF informed the district’s leaders that overseeing students’ religious rituals is well beyond their duties as instructors.*

*“Administrators and teachers must never be placed in the position of monitoring a child’s compliance with a particular religious requirement, such as prayer, dietary restrictions*

*or wearing a head covering,” FCDF’s cease-and-desist leader argues, noting that under these circumstances, the First Amendment requires neutrality on religion.*

*“The letter also makes it clear that public school officials are prohibited from favoring a particular religion at school.*

*“While students are allowed to practice their religion, the team [at FCDF] said, and “nothing in the Constitution prohibits public schools from accommodating students’ religious exercise,’ public schools are not allowed to have policies or practices that ‘convey a message that a particular religion, or a particular religious belief, is ‘favored,’” “FCDF said the district must “restore the rights of non-Muslim students of faith to be treated equally under the law’ and review all instances in which the school’s Ramadan policy was enforced.”*

*“Multiple complaints” from the community were waged against the school’s newly enforced pro-Muslim program, and one teacher in the school district just northeast of Seattle asked for legal assistance to keep Islam from infiltrating her classroom.*

*“An anonymous Northshore teacher contacted FCDF and said the district’s pro-Islam ‘diversity’ mandates are being forced on teachers,” FCDF informed. “The teacher stated the district’s oppressive policies “need[ed] to be exposed.’”*

*Several demands were made on the district by FDCF – if it wants to avoid a lawsuit:*

- Rescind the Ramadan Policy*
- Restore the rights of non-Muslim students of faith to be treated equally under the law*
- Undertake a review of all instances in which District officials enforced the Ramadan Policy*

- *Inform staff and parents of the District's unlawful actions and your efforts to remedy them*

*NSD will be sued if attorneys discover its failure to take action within five business days.*

- *'Piedra is amazed that teachers are expected to implement Islamic instruction in their classrooms when most don't even have a clue about student's free speech rights.*

*"No doubt school officials have a difficult job in accommodating their students' needs, but one may wonder how these 'educators' are qualified to teach our children when they can't even comprehend basic First Amendment principles," FCDF's legal expert noted.*

The school officials appear not to understand that, in making "reasonable accommodation" to students' religious needs, they cannot favor one religion over another. The Ramadan Policy of this school district goes beyond "reasonable accommodation." It is promoting Islam.

Similarly, the schedules of athletic events and competitions should not change to accommodate those weakened by fasting. Nor should homework assignments, or schedules of tests, exams, and papers, be modified – that is, postponed until after Ramadan ends –so as to accommodate Muslim students. That would constitute promotion of Islam.

In Washington State, the Northshore School District is about to get a lesson in Constitutional law from the Freedom of Conscience Defense Fund. The District's excessive accommodation of those students who are observing Ramadan, and thus its promotion of Islam, clearly implicate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. Let's hope that

the Northshore School District – and any school districts similarly inclined – will take that lesson to heart.

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