Diwali Should be a School Holiday

Across the country, the long-simmering fight to recognize Diwali as a school holiday is gaining ground in school boards.

Diwali or the festival of lights, as it is commonly known, is celebrated by more than 1.2 billion Hindus, Jains and Sikhs around the world, including 2 million Hindus in the United States. The holiday itself symbolizes the triumph of light over darkness, good over evil, and knowledge over ignorance. Families celebrate in many ways, including decorating their homes in vibrant lights and doing different prayers together. This year it was celebrated on November 4, 2021. Diwali is colloquially referred to as the “Indian Christmas.”

As significant of a holiday as Diwali is, it is not a school holiday in the vast majority of schools in the United States. Christian holidays, including Christmas, and Jewish holidays including Passover, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (at many schools, not BISB), have always been respected with a day off. Recently, in some places such as New York City, Eid-Al-Fitr has also become a school holiday.

Rory Lancman, a former member of the New York City council and state assembly, claimed that it’s “impossible” to argue against recognizing Diwali given recognition of these other holidays.

Not having the day off of school for Diwali has been tough for many Hindu families, including my own. As a senior in the IB Diploma Program, I find it hard to celebrate Diwali when I have to make school my first priority. I have never missed school on Diwali and have never been able to fully spend the day celebrating with my family as a result. This is the case for the majority of Hindu students, as they are forced to sacrifice much of the holiday as well. The Brookline and Newton school boards, and many across the country, have used this as an excuse to not have Diwali as a holiday, citing a lack of absences from students on the day of the holiday. This is a selfish excuse from them, as they fail to recognize that absences on Diwali are low because of the way students are unfairly prioritizing school.

Pushes to make Diwali a school holiday have been particularly strong in New York. This is happening after Mayor Bill de Blasio proclaimed he wouldn’t add any more school holidays to the academic calendar. Given that there are over 200,000 Hindus within the city, it is problematic that there is no day off to celebrate it.

At Valley Stream High School in New York, one student has been advocating for years to have the day off for Diwali. Abby Devi Arjune has spoken at multiple school board meetings, citing how it is not fair that Diwali is not recognized amid the numerous other holidays that are. “I came home from school tired and didn’t have a lot of energy for the limited time that we had to celebrate together as a family,” she said.

Opponents of making Diwali a school holiday, assert that there are already too many holidays in the school year. They say that making Diwali a school holiday could amplify this problem, by triggering calls for even more holidays from other religions. Paree Pasi, an Indian student in Pennsylvania, summed up her opposition to Diwali being a school holiday: “Suppose we make Diwali a school holiday, then a Muslim child comes along and wants all Muslim holy days to be declared school holidays. Everyone of every religious persuasion gets their holy days declared school holidays. What will that do to the educational system?”

However, these opposing views do not justify the impact that not having Diwali off has on Hindu students. It signals to Hindu students, particularly younger ones, that Diwali is not as important as other holidays. This makes it more difficult for them to understand the value of their own culture. To make sure that Hindu students are not impacted this way, it is very important that they get the day off to prioritize their holiday and be with their families like Christians, Jewish, and others get too.

At BISB, there are numerous students, like me, who identify as Hindu, and having a day off for the most significant holiday of our culture would be very meaningful.

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