Ramadan Enters New York City School Life

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Body

As **new** immigrants and **new** converts swell the numbers of Muslims in **New York City**, the rites of **Ramadan**, Islam's holiest period, have quietly seeped into the culture of the **city**'s **schools**.

At McKee High **School** on Staten Island, the basketball coach excuses one of his players from practice at sunset every day so he can dive into his gym bag for a snack. At a Brooklyn junior high **school**, a seventh grader with a Mickey Mouse ring sits patiently in the cafeteria every afternoon and watches her classmates noisily dig into platters of tuna sandwiches and applesauce.

And at **schools** across the **city**, nurses report an increase in the number of students treated for dizziness and stomachaches, and teachers say they notice some students acting up and others who seem calmer and more reflective.

Since Jan. 10, when **Ramadan** began, thousands of teen-agers from Parkchester to Bay Ridge, like Muslim youths across the country, have been fasting from dawn to dusk, quietly inserting into their daily **school** routines their annual ritual of self-restraint. **Ramadan** ends Saturday night, when a **new** moon appears in the sky and Muslims worldwide celebrate the Id al-Fitr feast on Sunday.

"It's just become a part of our **school** year," said Hector Rivera, the principal of Middle **School** 136 in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, where a smattering of Muslim youngsters have been fasting. "We just go through it."

"It seems a very meditative kind of holiday," he observed, and then wondered aloud what **school** would be like if every student fasted: junior high, he said with a laugh, would be a whole **new** experience.

For Liela and Shareefa Rahman, Palestinian-American sisters at Mr. Rivera's **school**, passing up lunch is generally no big deal. Why?

They answered in unison: "It's **school** food!"

Fasting has been more challenging for Ahmed Zayed, 13, an Egyptian immigrant who is spending his first **Ramadan** in this country. The other morning, Ahmed shuffled around the back of the cafeteria at Intermediate **School** 235 and rubbed his stomach. "When I see others eating, it's hard," he said, noting that in Egypt, hardly anyone would be eating during **Ramadan**. "I go to the back, so I don't see any food."

There are nearly half a million Muslims in the ***city***, but because the Board of Education does not keep files on children's religion, no one in the system knows how many are of ***school*** age and observe ***Ramadan***. The board recognized the first and last days of ***Ramadan*** as holy days a couple of years ago and now allows children to take the days off.

The ***Ramadan*** fast, a central tenet of Islam, is intended to engender a sense of empathy with the hungry. In the United States, some Muslims also see it as a rare withdrawal from consumerism. So during ***Ramadan*** -- the month when the Koran is believed to have been revealed -- every Muslim, once arrived at puberty, is required to refrain from eating and drinking -- even water -- during daylight hours. Exempted from the fast are the sick and the elderly, pregnant and menstruating women, and young children. Those in elementary ***school*** rarely fast, but once students ***enter*** junior high ***school***, the practice becomes more common.

Islam is said to be the fastest-growing faith in the United States: its adherents speak a variety of languages and come from places as diverse as Bedford-Stuyvesant, Bangladesh and the West Bank. There are large Muslim communities in Newark and Jersey ***City***, the Los Angeles metropolitan area, Chicago and Detroit, according to the Muslim Public Affairs Council, an advocacy group based in Los Angeles.

But uniting all Muslims in this country, experts say, is ***Ramadan***, which is increasingly regarded as their most important act of faith. "It has become a symbol of what it means to be a Muslim," said Yvonne Haddad, a historian who edited "Muslim Communities of North America" (SUNY Press, 1994).

In ***New York City schools*** with sizable Muslim populations, educators are increasingly trying to understand and explain ***Ramadan***'s significance to the larger student body: At John Jay High ***School*** in Park Slope, ***school*** officials announced the beginning of ***Ramadan*** over the loudspeakers last month. At Fort Hamilton High ***School*** in Brooklyn, the principal, Alice Farkouh, who is an Arab-American Christian, also allows students to leave early for Friday afternoon prayers.

But many more ***schools*** are like Mr. Rivera's M.S. 136, where about 30 of the 936 students are Muslim. Most of them are Palestinians who blend in with the mostly Hispanic student body -- except, that is, during ***Ramadan***. During these four weeks, Liela, 12, and Shareefa, 13, are among the small group of Muslim students who spend their lunch break in a corner of the cafeteria or in the schoolyard reading, if the weather is warm enough.

This is the first year the girls have seriously fasted. So far, they have slipped up only once, on a ***school*** trip to "Pocahontas on Ice," when all the children around them were munching on gooey nachos. Shareefa was salivating. "I was like, 'Man, I want to eat some nachos,' " she recalled. "I got a craving."

Liela, the quieter and more serious of the two, tried to stop her, but Shareefa could not resist. Nor, ultimately, could Liela. "I saw her eating next to me, and I had to have some," she confessed.

The girls say they feel no different from anyone else at ***school***. Shareefa said with a shrug that ***Ramadan*** is simply "regular." In fact, they say, they have more trouble with the stigma attached to being Muslim than with hunger from the fast.

Once, Shareefa said, a girl asked whether her parents were arranging her marriage. More recently, another student predicted that she would shrivel up and die before she finished fasting.

"That's not true!" snapped Shareefa. "They really don't know what they're talking about."

Liela and Shareefa, who were both born in ***New York***, do not know what it is to observe ***Ramadan*** in a heavily Muslim area. They have never been to their mother's home in Ramallah on the West Bank, nor their father's in Jordan. They know nothing of living in a town where restaurants do not open until sundown, where ***school*** is just half a day during the holy month, where there's no gym class and no nachos.

Miles away, in a blinding blue cafeteria in Long Island ***City***, Queens, Fahmida Chowdhury, 13, and her friends mused in Bengali about a different kind of ***Ramadan***. The girls, students at I.S. 235, are all recent immigrants from

Bangladesh, and this is their first American ***Ramadan***. In some ways, they said, it is an easier passage here: In Bangladesh, they would be sitting at home for half the month, getting bored and famished by midday.

Here, there is really only one thing that tempts Fahmida's taste buds: "Pizza," she confessed the other day, as the rest of the ***school*** went on with lunch -- a thick slab of cheese pizza and a banana.

One thing about ***Ramadan*** this year is easier, they agreed: it falls in midwinter, when the days are shorter. The Islamic lunar calendar is 10 days shorter than the Gregorian, so ***Ramadan*** rotates by 10 days every year and becomes a real challenge when the days are longer.

Some things are harder here, like the absence of their extended families, of everyone on the block getting up at the crack of dawn, feasting together at the end of the day, and staging huge parties to celebrate ***Ramadan***'s end. It is customary to wear ***new*** clothes to the festivities, and the girls have all done their shopping. But the parties just aren't the same in America.

"I already have ***new*** clothes for Eid," Farhana Afroze, 12, announced in Bengali. "But where am I going to show off these ***new*** clothes? I mean, that's the main thing!"

Graphic

Photo: Young immigrants from Bangladesh chat in their Queens ***school*** lunchroom and try not to think about food. (Edward Keating/The ***New York*** Times)

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