



N.J. districts weigh new holiday, Diwali, for school year

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by Eugene Palik

Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Day — and Diwali? As New Jersey school districts put their calendars together, the holiday season for several might include closing for the Hindu festival of lights.

Although Passaic schools have recognized the holiday for almost a decade, the push from parents in the state's Asian-Indian immigration strongholds has gained momentum since South Brunswick decided in 2010 to recognize the first of Diwali's five days.

With New Jersey's sizable Asian-Indian population growing, interest has also come from three districts with schools in Middlesex County — Monroe, West Windsor-Plainsboro and North Brunswick. And parents in Bernards Township in Somerset County, home to a surging number of Asian Indians, submitted a petition to the local school board in December.

"It would allow for time to celebrate as the holiday is meant to be celebrated: by going to the temple, calling relatives in India or simply celebrating with immediate family and friends throughout the day," said Saniya Waghray, a recent graduate of the township's Ridge High School.

Diwali is generally known as the Hindu New Year — a five-day event celebrated between October and December with feasts, music and fireworks.

It's one of the highest of holidays for Hindus, but it also has significance for other religious groups such as Jains, Sikhs and Buddhists.

The idea of closing schools for non-Christian religious holidays isn't unheard of in the New Jersey. Schools in municipalities such as Paterson and South Brunswick already close for a portion of the Muslim holiday Ramadan, and districts such as Cranford and Millburn recognize the Jewish holiday Rosh Hashanah.

Those closings came after school officials realized it made more sense to cancel rather than hold classes because of the high absentee rates that would occur on those holidays.



Following the state's well-trodden path of immigration, a wave of Asian Indians who came to New Jersey in the 1960s and 1970s has been fanning out from cities to bedroom communities.

The corresponding momentum for the holiday has been building as Asian-Indian residents, many of whom have sent their children through local schools, begin to speak out for their communities, said Khyati Joshi, an associate professor of education at Fairleigh Dickinson University.

"We've got concentrated numbers in New Jersey and people who have been here for a long time," Joshi said.

Passaic was the first municipality to officially mark Diwali, cutting classes to a half-day in November 2002.

The district now offers a full day off on the first day of the holiday.

It took almost a decade before another district in New Jersey followed suit. Deven Patel, a South Brunswick school board member, said petitioners there worked for five years before they were granted the holiday.

"I think it was a matter of timing," Patel said. "We now have a very strong Indian-American community here."

Timing also is what's driving the Bernards effort. Within the past decade, Asian Indians — who now represent almost 12 percent of the township's 26,652 people — have flocked to a massive development called the Hills, said William Draper, the township's volunteer demographer.

In fact, Asian-American enrollment at Bernards schools has rocketed 40.7 percent since 2006, according to data Draper provided.

He said that of the district's 1,134 Asian-American students, about 9 percent is of Asian-Indian descent. There are 5,725 students enrolled in Bernards Township.

The Diwali movement may be gaining strength in some towns, but it's still under the radar in the state's two largest Asian-Indian enclaves: Edison and Jersey City.

Edison schools don't observe Diwali as a holiday, but Edison Councilman Sudhanshu Prasad said he's heard some talk among parents about changing that.

In Jersey City, the four schools with major Asian-Indian populations mark the holiday by inviting parents to the school buildings for festivities, said Paula Christen, the school district's director of program evaluation. She said the population doesn't make up enough of the district's total to warrant a day off.



There's already an overarching state policy that addresses the demand &mdash a reason why there isn't a recognized holiday in Parsippany, where Asian Indians represent about 16 percent of the population. Diwali is one of several religious holidays for which the state allows excused absences.

That's enough for some districts, since adding more days off could complicate a school board's work in balancing existing holidays, snow days and a mandatory 180-day calendar. What also must be considered are students who don't observe that faith, and arrangements working parents must make to care for those children at home.

"There are so many cultural and traditional days that it's getting really difficult," North Brunswick School Superintendent Brian Zychowski said. "We don't want to observe one but not the other."

Still, a day off could be a viable option for those districts expecting sparsely attended and unproductive classes during Diwali, New Jersey School Boards Association spokesman Frank Belluscio said.

Petitions in Bernards and North Brunswick have already been submitted, and more discussions on those respective school boards are expected in the next few months.

"It's an issue people care deeply about," Joshi said. "Kids know a holiday's important when they have the day off."

Staff writers [Fred Kaimann](#) and [Tom Haydon](#) contributed to this report.