



Hillingdon Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE)

Authorising Pupil Absence for Religious Observance: Guidance for Headteachers and Governing Bodies

This document has the status of advice and provides overarching guidelines which schools may use in identifying absences for religious observance for pupils that should be authorised.

Context

Hillingdon is a proudly diverse community and recognises a person's religious beliefs and traditions can be intrinsic to their sense of identity and contribute to their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

Parents¹ are responsible for making sure that their children of compulsory school age receive a suitable full-time education. Those who are nurturing children and young people within a faith tradition, will also understandably want them to be able to engage in those key events which involve corporate worship and celebration, and which affirm their religious beliefs.

In the UK, the pattern of the school year takes account of most of the western Christian festivals and holy days for religious observance. Important days of religious observance in the calendars of other religious traditions and denominations may often fall in term time and specifically on school days.

It is the Governing Body of each school that determines the school's attendance policy, which the headteacher implements on a day-to-day basis, and to consider any requests of leave for religious observance or other exceptional circumstances.

This guidance has been prepared taking full account of current legislation in relation to attendance, to support schools in identifying absences for religious observance whilst not diminishing school procedures aimed at improving attendance.

The advice offered by SACRE herein relates only to school pupils and not to staff employed in schools.

Legislation

The 1996 Education Act² stipulates that:

“The child shall not be taken to have failed to attend regularly at the school by reason of his absence from the school – (c) on any day exclusively set apart for religious observance by the religious body to which his parent belongs.”

Parents are entitled to withdraw their child from school for religious observance³ where the day is exclusively set aside by the religious body to which the parents of the child are a member. Absence from school for religious observance are allowed and should be marked as authorised where headteachers are satisfied that the day has been set aside by the religious body and the parents of the child are members of that religious community.

¹ The term “parents” includes carers and guardians

² Education Act 1996, Part VI, Chapter II, Paragraph 444

³ Under regulation 6 Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006

Guidance

Therefore, Hillingdon SACRE advises that:

- headteachers should authorise absence only for the specified date(s) 'exclusively set apart by the religious body'
- absence taken on a school day for religious observance, for example during a festival, falling at a weekend, or in a school holiday, would not be authorised
- additional days taken on either side of the day explicitly set aside for observance would not be authorised on the grounds of religious observance.

Hillingdon SACRE would like to make note that religious observance may vary between different denominations and communities. For example, whilst Sunni Muslims may regard the festival of Ashura as a 'minor' festival, some Shia Muslims may deem this a day for religious observance of major significance for their faith.

Therefore, whilst headteachers and teachers must ensure that requests are genuine and reasonable, they are recommended not to doubt a request on grounds that other families of the same faith have not requested absence on the same day or at the same time. It may be the case that:

- the level of observance differs amongst families within the same faith tradition
- a particular denominational or cultural grouping observes different holy days to other groups within the same faith
- some pupils, though growing up within a faith community, may prefer to attend school on festival days others may set aside for religious observance.

Where there is a query whether the day has been set aside by the religious body, schools can:

- Contact Hillingdon SACRE to confirm the date or ask for guidance
- Check the relevant calendar on the Hillingdon SACRE webpage on the LEAP website
- Contact parents to provide more details of the religious observance from represent
- Request parents to confirm in writing that they are members of that particular religious community
- Confirm with or refer to the relevant religious body.

If a day has not been exclusively set aside the day for religious observance by respective the religious body, children will be expected to attend school on these days.

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If parents wish to take leave on such days, they will be expected to apply for leave under exceptional circumstances,⁴ and headteachers should consider whether to grant leave under exceptional circumstances and in doing so consider whether the religious observance can be accommodated outside of school hours.

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If a Headteacher grants a leave request, it will be for the headteacher to determine the length of time that the child can be away from school.

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If the headteacher does not agree the reasons provided substantiate these circumstances, the leave can be considered 'unauthorised.'

⁴ Under regulation 7 Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006

Whilst sympathetic to the need of families with relatives and heritage overseas, headteachers will seldom authorise exceptional leave of absence for extended visits abroad because of the consequences for pupils' attendance and learning.

In addition:

Parents should be asked to give the school as much notice of a proposed absence as is reasonably possible and be willing to discuss with the school how pupils will catch up with work missed.

Some schools may wish to send written communications to parents asking for advance notice of requests for absence for religious observance.

However, due to the adherence to a lunar calendar for festivals, some communities may only be able to identify approximate not specific dates for religious observance too far in advance.

Hillingdon schools should be aware of the religious communities represented within their school and are advised to take reasonable steps to ensure, whenever possible, that school events— such as parents' evenings and school performances – are not booked on days of significant religious importance to pupils and their families to avoid the risk of indirect discrimination⁵ causing disadvantage to those pupils with a particular characteristic.

Moreover, there may be further expectations of religious prayer and observance throughout the year for some religiously observant children and young people.

Schools can usually make provision for these pupils to fulfil these observances without the need for absence during the school day.

For example, a prayer room and nearby facilities for washing can on the school site could be provided.

Schools wishing to provide these facilities, either throughout the year, or during particularly significant periods of the year (e.g. Ramadan), are advised to contact Hillingdon SACRE for further guidance.

Policy

Hillingdon SACRE agreed the guidance contained herein on 26/6/24 and will review and update this guidance at regular intervals.

⁵ (Equality Act 2010 – DfE Advice for School leaders Sept 2012)