

Muslim Pupils in State Schools: Recommendations of the Canton of Zurich

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Muslim Pupils at State Schools: Recommendations

In 1989 the Department of Education, after consultations with representatives of the Islamic communities, issued guidelines on the integration of Muslim pupils at state schools. Islam has now become a major religion in Switzerland and in the Canton Zurich an increasing number of pupils with a Muslim background are attending state schools. These include Albanophone pupils as well as pupils from Turkey, Bosnia and Arab and African countries.

All pupils attending compulsory schools have the same rights and duties. The same principles therefore apply to pupils from different religious backgrounds. Freedom of religion and of conscience is a right guaranteed by the Federal Constitution and by the Schools Act. As far as possible, schools try to ensure that pupils can carry out their religious obligations.

The recommendations of the year 1989 have now been revised on the basis of feedback and experience provided by Muslim discussion partners, teachers and local education authorities.

The Department of Education issues the following recommendations:

1. Dispensation from classes on religious high holy days

§ 62 of the State School Ordinance states that pupils of all religions may be exempted from attendance at the request of their parents on religious high holy days or for special occasions. The regulations for dispensations on religious grounds of 29 October 1991 cover the possibility of dispensation for Muslim pupils as well.

The high religious holidays for Sunni Islam are:

- The feast of Ramadan: (al id al fitr (Arabic), Seker bayrami (Turkish), bajram i vogel (Albanian); 3 days
- The feast of the Sacrifice: al id al kabir (Arabic), kurban bayrami (Turkish), bajram i madh (Albanian); 4 days.

Muslim pupils are to be exempted from classes on these days at the oral or written request of their parents. In many cases dispensation is requested only for the first days. The dates of these religious holy days are moveable (for the years 2003-2008 see annex).

2. Gymnastics and swimming classes

In principle there are no subjects that Muslim boys and girls cannot attend. The principle of integration for all in the state school common to all must be applied.

It should be noted that the Islamic religion requires the covering of the female body from the age of puberty onwards. In gymnastics and in swimming classes, pupils should be given the opportunity to cover their bodies or to swim in light clothes if their parents make a request to this effect.

In Muslim countries, there is a strong taboo for religious reasons against boys and girls (or adults) appearing completely naked in a group. This also applies to persons of the same sex. If pupils need to take showers, this should be done in cabins that can be locked or which can be closed off by curtains. Alternatively, children's access to showers and cabins should be staggered.

Exemption from swimming classes requires a written letter of justification by the parents to the local education authority requesting dispensation for their children on that day. The school authorities talk to the parents and discuss the circumstances in which participation in swimming classes would be possible. It should be noted that there is a Federal Court ruling in favour of dispensation from swimming classes for religious reasons which states that a dispensation must be granted (BGE 119 1a 178 18.6.1993). Dispensations are granted for a specific period of time (the basis for dispensation from individual subjects is § 60 of the State School Ordinance).

3. Dispensation from individual lessons in the fast month of Ramadan

In the fast month of Ramadan, practising Muslims refrain from eating and drinking from dawn to dusk and generally also abstain from smoking and the use of perfume. In some Muslim communities, playing music and singing are also banned during this month. Pupils who are observing the Ramadan fast should at the oral or written request of their parents be exempted from gymnastics and cooking classes and should be given other school-related tasks during this time.

4. Dispensation for Friday prayers

The children of strict practising Muslims who observe the duty to pray in the mosque are to be exempted from classes at the request of their parents (in application of § 60 section 2 of the State School Ordinance and the regulations concerning exemption on religious ground). The children concerned must make up for the work missed in class. The religious requirement to take part in these prayers applies to male Muslims from the age of puberty onwards. Prayers last for between half an hour and one hour. As they take place over the midday period, the impact on lessons is only marginal. As Friday prayers take place only in large prayer rooms or in mosques – of which there are only a small number in the Canton Zurich – the question of dispensation is unlikely to affect more than a small number of pupils.

5. No dispensation from individual lessons or from lesson content

Exemption from individual lesson content as defined in the timetable and in the State School Ordinance should not be granted. The only exception is "Biblical History", from which children may be exempted at the request of parents.

In the case of lessons with Christian content (for example Christmas preparations), no special arrangements are to be made for non-Christian pupils. However, teachers should show sensitivity to the religious feelings of children from other backgrounds. The various religions should be integrated into lessons. Knowledge of world religions is a goal for all pupils.

6. Participation in class camps and excursions

The class camp is a school week. Its purpose is to teach social learning and general education (geography, sport) and to promote the integration of all pupils in the class group. Whenever necessary, talks should be held with Muslim parents to find out the conditions that need to be met to enable their children to take part in the class camp without infringing religious regulations. It should be stressed that at all class camps a female accompanying person is generally present (§ 7 Class Camp Regulations) and that separate dormitories for boys and girls are guaranteed. Food provisions are also to be strictly observed (no pork).

Parents not agreeing with the participation of their child in the class camp do not enlist it. For the purpose of mutual information they give the teacher their reasons for this decision. Pupils not participating in the class camp have to attend lessons in another form of the local school (§ 5 para. 2 Class Camp Regulations).

7. No clothing restrictions

The state schools in the Canton Zurich have no clothing restrictions for children. This is the responsibility of parents.

If you have any questions, please contact the Intercultural Education Sector, Volksschulamt (Tel 043 259 53 61), e-mail ikp@vsa.bid.zh.ch or the Legal Services Sector (Tel 043 259 22 55, e-mail rechtsdienst@vsa.bid.zh.ch).

If the school authorities reject a request for dispensation, they must provide a written justification and the ruling must be accompanied by an explanation of the legal recourse available to the parents (recourse to the district school authorities).

Annex:

Dates of religious holy days

The dates below may vary by a maximum of one day. The precise date will be notified each year shortly before the holy day.

The Muslim religious year is based on the lunar calendar and is therefore shorter than our calendar year. As a result, the dates go back by about ten days every year, which explains why in 2006 the Feast of the Sacrifice occurs twice.

Year	Ramadan	Feast of the Sacrifice
2007	13 October	20 December
2008	2 October	9 December