



AB 1503 (Lee): Excused Absences

CAIR-CA Position: SPONSOR



Summary

AB 1503, authored by Assemblymember Lee, will allow K-12 students to take one full day of excused absence per semester for religious reasons and clarifies language to ensure its enforcement.

Background & Problem

Currently, California statute only allows a student to take four hours per semester of excused time for religious reasons. Education Code 48205(12) (c) states: “Attendance at religious retreats shall not exceed four hours per semester.” However, school days are longer than four hours, so an excused absence of four hours only constitutes a half day in most cases. There are numerous religious holidays that may not be recognized by a school district as an excused holiday, such as Eid al-Fitr, Diwali, Rosh Hashanah, Ash Wednesday, and many others. These holidays hold significant meaning within different religious groups and the communities that engage in these celebrations.

In addition, the term “religious retreats” is not defined, and the bill offers a definition which explains that religious retreats may include religious holidays, congregation, or any event related to a student’s religion. The bill seeks to clarify the statute and ensure the enforcement of excused absences.

The Californian, which is a statewide paper ran by high school students, highlighted this issue in an article, noting that a student must miss a religious holiday in order to avoid receiving an unexcused absence. “We can’t have all the days off, but we would like to have one day off,” said a parent and teacher in the school.

The article also notes that Christian students have the advantage of taking time off for holidays such as Christmas, but the same opportunity is not extended to students that celebrate other religious holidays.

A half day may be insufficient for a student to celebrate an important religious holiday because gatherings may take place in a variety of locations and could require commuting to other family members or locations for an event. A partially excused absence does not fully meet the need for students who choose to participate in their religious practices.

Solution

This bill allows students to receive an excused absence of one full school day per semester in K-12 schools to attend religious holidays and gatherings, thus reinforcing California’s commitment to diversity and fostering cultural competency.

Support

- Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-CA) (Sponsor)
- CA Association of Private School Organizations
- California Catholic Conference
- Generation Up (GENup)