

RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL HOLIDAYS POLICY 2-YEAR PILOT REVIEW

BEDFORD SCHOOL COMMITTEE
JUNE 11, 2019

Religious and Cultural Holidays Policy

- Any student who is absent due to a religious or major cultural holiday observance, will, upon notification by the parent, have his or her absence recorded as exempt.
- Any student who is unable, because of religious and/or cultural beliefs, to attend class shall be provided with the time (no less than one week) and the opportunity to make up missed work and/or assessments. Open and timely communication between students, families and teachers shall ensure that the opportunity to make up work/assessments does not place an unreasonable burden upon any of the parties.

*(2-year pilot)

Approved May 9, 2017

PREVIOUS POLICY AND PRACTICE

- Bedford had no School Committee policy regarding the assignment of homework, projects or tests on other religious holidays, but it has had a long standing practice of directing teachers not to do so on the Jewish high holidays (Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur)
- Bedford held no school on Christmas Eve day and has a half day for students on Good Friday
- Beginning two years ago, the middle school social studies department updated its world religions component of the sixth and seventh grade curriculum
- Beginning two years ago, each school includes acknowledgement during the morning announcements of the religious and cultural holidays as earmarked on the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education calendar

CHALLENGES NEEDING ATTENTION

- Too much interrupted learning
- Lack of clear policy guidelines regarding the treatment of absences due to, or the handling of school work on, religious holidays and major cultural holidays such as Chinese New Year and Kwanzaa
- No clear standard for determining on which holidays there should be no school
- Inequitable treatment of different faith and cultural practices
- Insufficient student awareness of diverse beliefs and traditions

TASK FORCE CHARGE

- In the context of the increasing diversity of our student body, to recommend clear policy guidelines that promote:
 - Respectful acknowledgment of different faiths/beliefs
 - Opportunities for students to learn about and respect each other's different beliefs and traditions
 - Equitable treatment of students whose families hold different beliefs
- While
- Minimizing interruption to learning

PROCESS

- Created an inclusive interfaith task force of students, parents, faculty and community members
- Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, secular Chinese, Atheist
- Sought but secured only partial clergy participation
- Reviewed religious holiday attendance data for students and teachers
- Created a set of recommended guidelines
- Solicited feedback on guidelines from all constituencies (Survey received 1200 responses)
- Task Force reconvened to review survey results and modify or reconfirm recommendations
- Met with/received feedback from members of the Bedford Clergy Council and additional clergy
- Held two School Committee meetings with opportunities for public comment before School Committee vote

SALIENT CHALLENGES

- There is no current School Committee policy so teachers' practices vary and families do not know what to expect or what their students' rights are regarding absences and missed work
- There are too many holidays to allow for academic progress if a policy required teachers not to give new material, homework, quizzes and/or tests
- It would be inequitable to have a no homework/no test policy for some faith observances and not others
- Some families feel torn about keeping their children out of school if they are going to miss too much work
- There is no clear standard for determining on which holidays there should be no school.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS BASED UPON:

- Minimize disruption of learning by:**

- having no school only on Christmas Eve day when the high rate of student and teacher absence would preclude academic progress
- Allowing for normal teaching and learning on all religious and cultural* holidays, including new material, tests, quizzes and homework

- Have a policy that:**

- Excuses all absences due to observance of religious or cultural* holidays upon parent request
- Provides for extra time for observant students to make up missed work or tests and the expectation that teachers will work with students to do so in a manner that minimizes the burden
- Includes major religious holidays and cultural* holidays as designated by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education on the school calendar

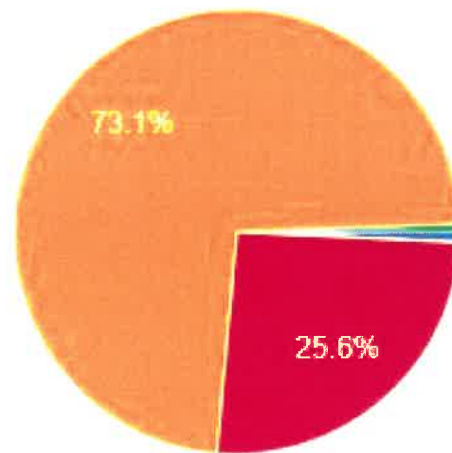
- **Provide professional development and regular administration memos that:**
 - Orient teachers' awareness of the new policy and school calendar so they can anticipate student absences and plan, whenever feasible, not to give tests or major projects.
 - Facilitate increased faculty awareness, sensitivity and readiness to support students who miss work due to these observances.
- Ensure the promotion of awareness of diversity of beliefs through morning announcements of impending holidays (whether week day or week end)**
- Pilot for two years and review**

*e.g., Chinese New Year and Kwanzaa

PILOT REVIEW SURVEY RESULTS

I am a:

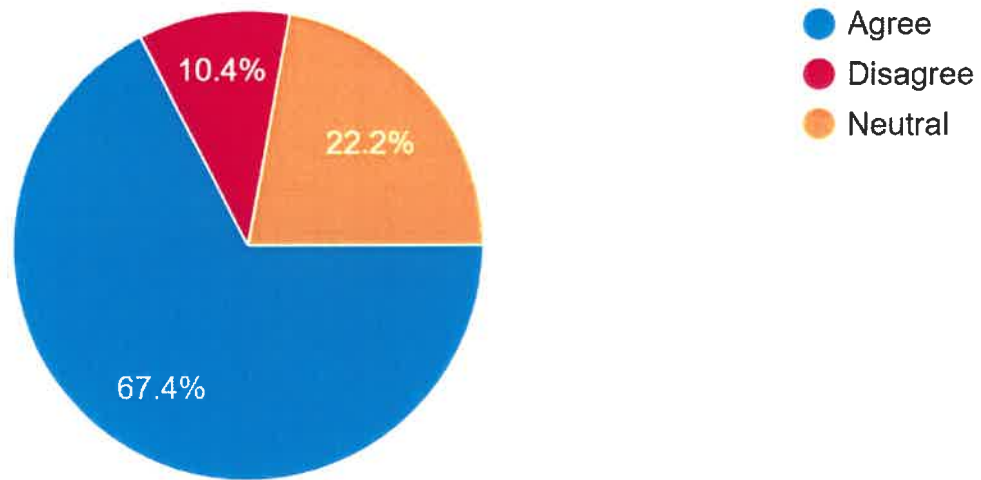
387 responses



- Student
- Faculty Member
- Parent
- Community Member

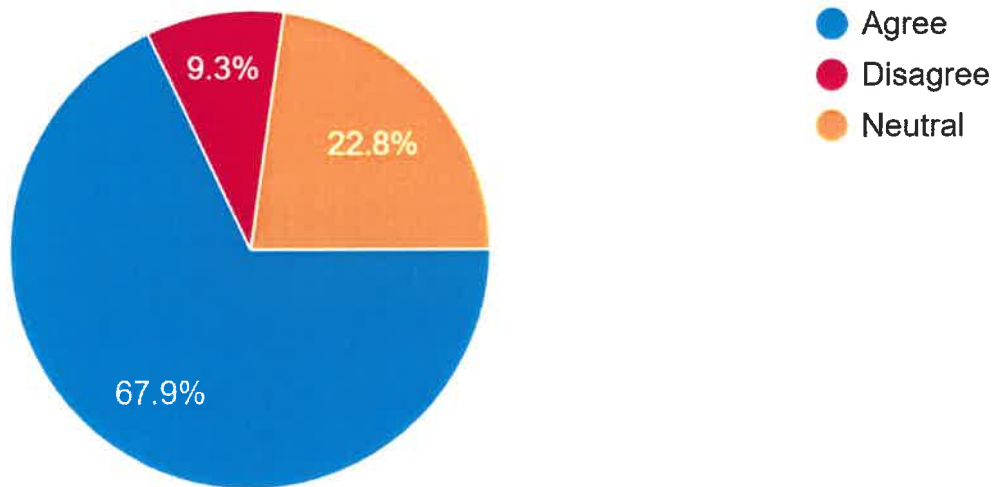
The new policy effectively addresses the problem of academic interruptions.

383 responses



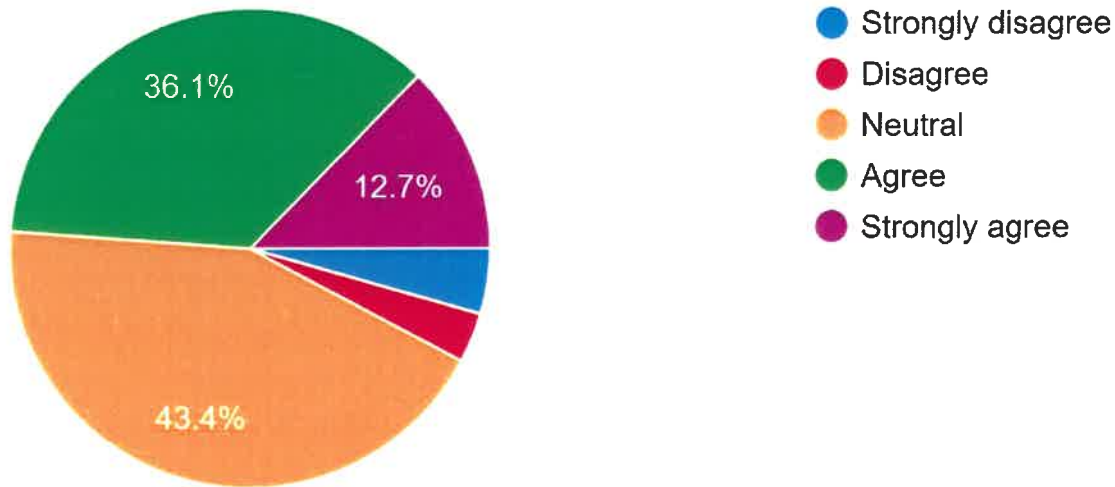
The new policy is more equitable than the past practice.

386 responses



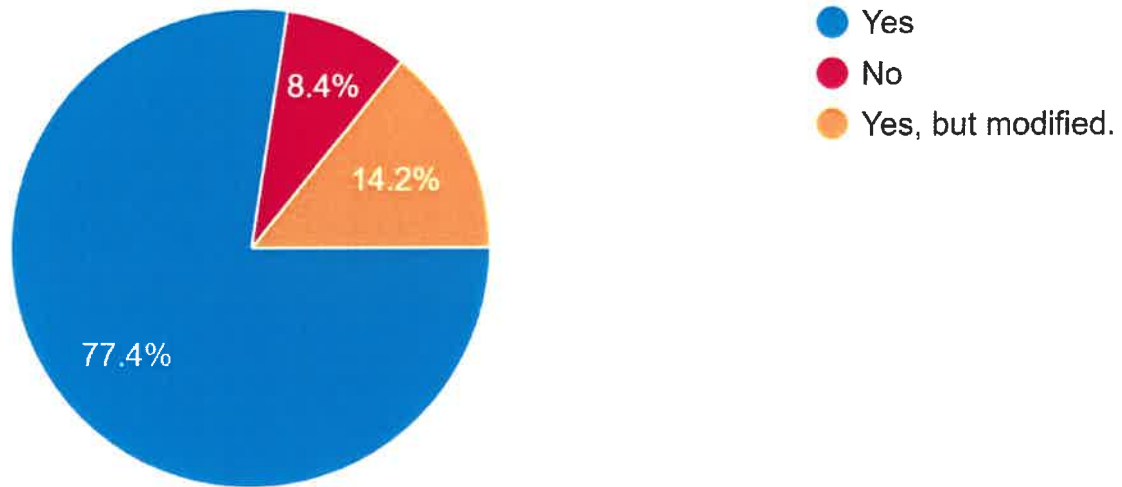
In my experience, the policy has been carried out consistently and fairly.

385 responses



I would like to see the policy continued.

380 responses



ISSUES RAISED

1. Generally, it is unfair to have homework and/or tests on religious holidays or those traditionally observed (7 parents/ 1 faculty member)
2. There should be no school or a half day on Good Friday (4 parents/ 3 faculty members)
3. There should be no school on the Jewish High Holidays (3 parents/1 faculty member)
4. There has been inconsistent implementation, with examples of having less than 1 week to make up work
5. Chinese New Year has been excluded
6. There has been inconsistent acknowledgment of religious and cultural holidays- either too many or too few

SUPERINTENDENT'S RECOMMENDATION

- Inform current families, faculty and students about the process, challenges and rationale for the new policy
 - Email all with Powerpoint attachment
 - Engage Citizen and Minuteman in doing article on the policy, TF and rationale
- Share the recent survey results
- Work with schools to improve fair and consistent implementation of the policy
 - Create a vehicle for complaints regarding unfair implementation
- Reaffirm policy