

Written Testimony

Designate Diwali
as an official public holiday in the
New York City Public School System

Submitted by:

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Dear City Council Members:

On behalf of the Hindu American Foundation, I'm writing to urge you to support Resolution 146, which calls "upon the New York City Department of Education to establish Diwali as an official holiday for New York City public school students."

First, we want to commend Council Members Dromm, Constantinides, Vallone, Grodenchik, Lancman, Miller, Adams, Richards, Chin, Koo, Menchaca, Rose, Koslowitz, Brannan, Powers, Reynoso, Ayala, Torres, Holden, Rivera, Van Bramer, Moya, Rosenthal, Kallos, Levine, Ampry-Samuel, Salamanca, Cohen, Lander, Treyger, Levin, Cabrera, Cumbo and Ulrich for introducing this important resolution.

We also acknowledge and commend members of the Hindu American community in New York for their organic, grassroots effort on this campaign.

According to the Census Bureau's 2016 American Community Survey, there were about 227,825 New York City residents who identify themselves as Asian Indian, of whom approximately one-third or more are adherents of Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, or Buddhism. While many of the Hindus in New York City originate from India, there are sizable Hindu populations from Trinidad & Tobago, Guyana, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan throughout the five boroughs.

Every borough of New York City is home to at least one Hindu temple, from the Bhakti Center in Manhattan to the Brooklyn Hindu Temple to the Shree Ram Temple in Staten Island to the Vishnu Mandir in the Bronx. Queens, of course, is home to an estimated 60% of the city's total number of Hindus and dozens of Hindu temples (some 60 alone have been founded by Indo-Caribbeans). Both the Gita Mandir in Queens,

established in 1975, and the renowned Ganesh Temple in Flushing, consecrated in 1977, are considered to be two of the oldest in the United States. The Ganesh Temple is home to over 25,000 devotees and host to thousands more during its Diwali celebrations.

Beyond serving the Hindu population, most Hindu temples and community organizations are also actively involved in *seva*, or selfless service of those in need, locally as well as nationally.

In 2014, the City Council urged the State of New York's Department of Education to "establish Diwali as an official school holiday for NYC public students" (Res. 18632013). The City already suspends alternate side parking on Diwali.

In 2013 and 2019, the State of California, also home to a large population of Hindus, Sikhs, and Jains, worked with the Hindu American Foundation to declare October as 'Hindu American Awareness & Appreciation Month,' highlighting the importance of Diwali as well as a number of contributions of the Hindu American community to the U.S.

Passage of this resolution would build on that precedent and bring us closer to achieving a more pluralistic and dignified society, with a public education system in place where all children are equal and can thrive in a more respectful environment.

Lastly, it is worth noting that some American localities with growing Hindu, Sikh, Jain, and Buddhist populations have incorporated Diwali in their school holiday calendars, such as Passaic, New Jersey, South Brunswick, New Jersey, and Howard County, Maryland.

We believe that New York City is the greatest city on Earth and that we should not only follow the example of other cities and states who expanded religious freedom and embrace diversity—but we should be leading them. New York City has begun to demonstrate this through its inclusion of Eid and Lunar New Year as public school holidays. It is now time for the City to equally recognize its Hindu, Sikh, Jain and Buddhists denizens alongside its Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Chinese residents.

Diwali, is a five-day festival that begins on the 15th day of the Hindu month of Kartik (October/November). It is the most important festival on the Hindu calendar, celebrating the triumph of good over evil and marking the New Year.

Hindus celebrate Diwali as the victory of good over evil and of knowledge over ignorance. Sikhs celebrate Diwali as the Day of Liberation, when the sixth Sikh Guru, Hargobind, was released from imprisonment along with 52 other kings. Jains commemorate Diwali as the day Lord Mahavira, the last of the Tirthankaras, attained Nirvana, or liberation.

For more information about Diwali, you can read the HAF Diwali Toolkit at: www.hinduamerican.org/diwali-toolkit.