

# HOUSE BILL REPORT

## SSB 5173

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**As Reported by House Committee On:**  
Judiciary

**Title:** An act relating to the respecting holidays of faith and conscience act.

**Brief Description:** Respecting holidays of faith and conscience.

**Sponsors:** Senate Committee on Commerce & Labor (originally sponsored by Senators Hasegawa, Kline, Frockt and Chase).

**Brief History:**

**Committee Activity:**

Judiciary: 2/25/14, 2/26/14 [DPA].

**Brief Summary of Substitute Bill  
(As Amended by Committee)**

- Entitles employees of the state and its political subdivisions to two unpaid holidays per year for reasons of faith or conscience or organized religious activities.
- Provides that an employer must allow an employee to take the unpaid holidays on specific days for reasons of faith or conscience or organized religious activities, unless the absence would create an undue hardship or the employee is necessary to maintain public safety.
- Allows public school students to be absent for up to two days per school year, without penalty, for reasons of faith or conscience or organized religious activities.
- Requires institutions of higher education and state-funded workforce training programs to accommodate student absences for up to two days to allow students to take holidays for reasons of faith and conscience or organized religious activities.

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### HOUSE COMMITTEE ON JUDICIARY

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*This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.*

**Majority Report:** Do pass as amended. Signed by 9 members: Representatives Jinkins, Chair; Hansen, Vice Chair; Goodman, Kirby, Klippert, Orwall, Roberts, Shea and Walkinshaw.

**Minority Report:** Do not pass. Signed by 4 members: Representatives Rodne, Ranking Minority Member; Nealey, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Haler and Muri.

**Staff:** Omeara Harrington (786-7136).

**Background:**

Legal Holidays and School Holidays.

Legal holidays are identified in statute, and include: Sundays, New Year's Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Presidents' Day, Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, Labor Day, Veterans' Day, Thanksgiving Day and the day after, and Christmas Day. Statute provides a list of school holidays that match the list of legal holidays. School must not be taught on listed school holidays.

Employee Leave.

Employees of the state and its political subdivisions are entitled to one paid holiday per calendar year in addition to legal holidays. An employee may select the day upon which the additional holiday is taken after consultation with his or her employer pursuant to personnel guidelines. Employees of school districts and nonclassified employees of institutions of higher education who are appointed or under contract to perform services for less than one year are not entitled to an additional paid holiday.

Federal and state laws protect employees from workplace discrimination on a number of protected bases, including religion. Under Title VII of the federal Civil Rights Act, absent undue hardship on the employer's operation of its business, an employer must provide reasonable accommodation for the employee's sincerely held religious beliefs or practices. A reasonable accommodation may include schedule changes or leave for religious observances.

Compulsory School Attendance.

Compulsory school attendance laws require children from the age of eight until they turn age 18 to attend public school full-time, unless they attend a private school, are homeschooled, are 16 years or older and employed, or have graduated. The school district superintendent may additionally excuse a child from attendance for reasons of physical or mental inability to attend, attendance at a residential or correctional facility, or because the child's parents have requested a temporary absence, unless absence would have a serious adverse effect upon the child's progress. Students temporarily excused by a superintendent may be claimed as full-time equivalent students, to the extent they would otherwise have been claimed, for purposes of basic education funding allocation and instructional requirements.

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**Summary of Amended Bill:**

Employees of the state and its political subdivisions are entitled to two unpaid holidays per calendar year for a reason of faith or conscience or an organized activity conducted under the auspices of a religious denomination, church, or religious organization. Employees of school districts and nonclassified employees of institutions of higher education who are appointed or under contract to perform services for less than one year, and employees of public institutions of higher education, including community colleges, technical colleges, and workforce training programs, are also entitled to the two unpaid holidays per year. If an employee wishes to take the additional holidays on specific days for reasons of faith or conscience, or for an organized activity conducted under the auspices of a religious denomination, church, or religious organization, the employer must allow the employee to do so unless the employee's absence would impose an undue hardship on the employer or the employee is necessary to maintain public safety. The Office of Financial Management must promulgate, by rule, a definition of "undue hardship."

An additional exception to compulsory public school attendance is permitted. A child may be excused from school, subject to approval by the student's parent, for a reason of faith or conscience or an organized activity conducted under the auspices of a religious denomination, church, or religious organization, for up to two days per school year without penalty. These absences cannot mandate school closures. Students excused for these absences may be claimed as full-time equivalent students, to the extent they would otherwise have been claimed, for purposes of basic education funding allocation and instructional requirements.

Institutions of higher education and state-funded workforce training programs must develop policies to accommodate student absences for up to two days per academic year for reasons of faith or conscience, or for an organized activity conducted under the auspices of a religious denomination, church, or religious organization, without adverse impact to the students' grades.

#### **Amended Bill Compared to Substitute Bill:**

The striking amendment makes several changes to the underlying bill:

The work and school absences authorized under the bill may be for an organized activity conducted under the auspices of a religious denomination, church, or religious organization, in addition to for a reason of faith or conscience. It is specified that the unpaid days of leave granted in the bill pertain only to leave taken for reasons of faith or conscience or organized religious activity. In addition to reasons of undue hardship, an employer need not accommodate an employee's request to take an unpaid holiday on a specific date if the employee is necessary to maintain public safety. The Office of Financial Management must establish, by rule, a definition of "undue hardship."

Language is added to provide that the up to two absences students are permitted for reasons of faith or conscience, or for an organized religious activity, are "per academic year." The sections requiring institutions of higher education and workforce training programs to develop policies to accommodate student absences are modified to state that absences are for "up to two days" of absences per academic year rather than "not less than two days." The

section regarding workforce training programs is narrowed to apply only to state-funded workforce training programs. Other changes are made for technical correctness and clarity.

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**Appropriation:** None.

**Fiscal Note:** Preliminary fiscal note available.

**Effective Date of Amended Bill:** The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.

**Staff Summary of Public Testimony:**

(In support) This bill has brought together many people from different religious communities. The standard holiday calendar is a Gregorian calendar, but for many the holiday calendar is a lunar calendar, which changes from year to year. It is important to allow two unpaid holidays or school absences to accommodate holy days. There have been multiple instances of employers not allowing employees to take leave to observe religious holidays, and parents have to negotiate with schools to allow absences for religious holidays. For some, celebrating a religious holiday would force them to lose their employment. This will be of particular benefit to the Muslim and Jewish communities, and to people of other faiths whose holy days do not fall on legal holidays. This will alleviate the conflict that can arise between religious liberty and normal civic life and calendars. Many of the people this bill will affect are immigrants who have fled their countries of origin and live with physical and psychological scars. These individuals identify with American ideals, and strive to contribute. Employers do not have to accommodate days off if the employee's absence would cause an undue hardship.

This bill has been in consideration since the 2013 session so it has had ample time to be vetted. It received a unanimous vote in the Senate. There have been some additional suggestions made and likely a striking amendment will be proposed to incorporate these suggestions.

(Other) The section of the bill regarding workforce training programs, as drafted, will only affect the private vocational sector. These are not degree programs or public institutions. Because the rest of the bill only affects the public sector, an amendment is suggested to either remove that section entirely or amend it to only apply to "state-funded" workforce programs.

Law enforcement agencies need to be able to ensure staffing levels are sufficient for public safety reasons. It is unclear what would constitute a bona fide hardship, so the bill should be amended to allow a denial of a holiday on a specific day if the employee is necessary to maintain public safety.

(Opposed) None.

**Persons Testifying:** (In support) Senator Hasegawa, prime sponsor; Zaynab Farole, Muslim Civic Leadership; Abdirahman Mohamed, Abu Bakr Islamic Center of Washington; Jamila

Farole, Muslim Civic Leadership; Rabbi Seth Goldstein, Jewish Coalition of Justice; Trevor Sandison, Faith Action Network; and Miguel Perez-Gibson.

(Other) Nova Gattman, Workforce Board; and Rob Huss, Washington State Patrol.

**Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying:** None.