



## Association of School and College Leaders Information Paper

Ramadan: Exams and Tests, 2018

### Information for Schools and Colleges

I have seen a copy of the above information paper which our school is using to justify advising mature students to break their fasts. It also suggests throughout the paper that fasting is not important and students should not fast during Ramadan. I have looked at the names of endorsers, but I do not find any who hold a reputation in Islamic jurisprudence; there is not a single reputable mufti. As a learned Islamic jurist and having expertise in education, research and Islam can you please inform what is the sound Islamic position?

Fatwa No: 1439/117

وعليكم السلام ورحمة الله وبركاته

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

هو الموفق

حامدا ومصليا ومسلما

الجواب ومنه الصواب

I am aware of the information paper as it has been in circulation for some time. Schools do have a safeguarding responsibility, however it seems any public Islamic practice is seen as an affront to integration. The education sector, including Ofsted, has lost its impartiality and is bent upon removing any Islamic identity from our children. Schools are secular organisations but now feel better equipped to inform Muslims how to be Muslims. ASCL's information paper reads in parts like a fatwā rather than educating and informing schools how they can assist Muslim students during Ramadan. There are many issues with the paper and I do not have time to address each and every point; sufficient to say that we do not accept many of the points discussed in the paper. This is not my position only but the position of anyone who follows Traditional Islam which is following an accepted tradition rather than outlier positions which have no basis.

The key principle to bear in mind is

ان هذا العلم دين فانظروا عمن تأخذون دينكم



“Without any ambiguity or doubt this Islamic knowledge is faith; so beware as to whom you take your faith from.”

The reputable ‘Ulamā who are vouched for by many other ‘Ulamā and religious institutes are the ones we should be learning our faith from. ASCL has overstepped their remit by offering religious advice. Have they offered religious advice to Sikhs, Christians or Jews?

ASCL states on page 1 that it, ‘does not endorse any particular interpretation of Islamic law or practice,’ then why is the ethos of the whole paper convincing students not to fast by offering outlier views which have not been corroborated?

Page 2 states, ‘Younger children **may do** a partial fast but this should be in **consultation** and under the supervision of parents, carers and **schools.**’ So schools should decide when a child performs an act of worship? Is this universally applicable to all acts of worship for all faiths?<sup>1</sup>

On the same page ‘...but also **has the potential** to cause the individual temporary hardship through hunger and lack of liquids during fasting hours which **may impact on physical wellbeing and cognitive performance.**’ If an organisation like ASCL is going to offer advice then it should be based on sound research and not terms which have no certainty; either fasting has an impact or not? If it did I am sure you would find many references to numerous works of research carried out determining this very effect.

Furthermore, on the same page a new definition of maturity is brought – ‘intellectual maturity’ which seems to suggest an age between 16-19. I have never heard of such a thing; nor have the numerous colleagues I spoke to. It is beyond ridiculous.

Further down the page, ‘Children and families should be informed of the flexibility Islamic Law offers to delay or exempt themselves from fasting and late-night prayers if they believe their performance in exams and tests could be affected.’ It is not a secular school’s responsibility to teach Muslims about their faith and cause confusion. It seems Traditional Islam has no place in schools but this alien ‘islam’ has a place in schools.

‘Islam encourages critical reasoning and while individuals may seek advice from religious leaders, they have the right to make their own decision.’ This shows a complete lack of understanding regarding Islam – critical reasoning by non-experts in Islam is a folly as it is in in any area of expertise. There is no doubt that it is a moral code and one can act on whatever they choose, but they must also know the sin and consequences of not keeping fasts.

In the section titled, ‘Ramadan, 2018’ it states, ‘There is **no doubt** that Ramadan falling during the exam season will **put extra pressure** on young Muslims, whatever decision they

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<sup>1</sup> All emphasis by bolding text is mine in order to draw attention of reader to key points.



make, especially with the length of the fast over the next few years.' Where is the evidence to validate that statement?

In the 'Safeguarding Issues' which is sadly now a catch-all statement for a school or authority to act in whichever way it chooses against Islamic practices, which in this case is to confuse Muslims. Due to this, other safeguarding matters are not given due attention, so we are witnessing huge spikes of abuse via social media which needs investment and policy now and over the next few years. It states, 'If the **school** notices **signs of dehydration or exhaustion** then the child should be asked if they are fasting and **advised to terminate the fast immediately by drinking some water**. They can be reassured that in this situation, **Islamic rulings allow them to break their fast and make it up later.**' I appreciate the aim of this statement, but it is either very clumsy or poorly thought out. Firstly, who is the school? A class teacher, ancillary staff, Muslim, non-Muslim, first aider or SLT member? Do they have expertise in determining dehydration from someone who maybe thirsty? How does drinking water deal with exhaustion? Why is the student being advised to break his fast, where is the informed choice now which was lauded earlier? But the final sentence is as troublesome because now ASCL is acting as a Dār al-Iftā in which it issues a fatwā and states, 'They can be reassured that in this situation, **Islamic rulings allow them to break their fast and make it up later.**' It was only a couple of pages earlier when ASCL said, 'ASCL does not endorse any particular interpretation of Islamic Law or practice.' Well, clearly it does.

In the section, 'Diversity within Islamic Law and ethics (Shari'ah)' it states, 'This means that **when there are competing views, an individual is at liberty to decide what is best** for themselves and their family.' This is incorrect.

In the section, 'The importance of education in Islamic Law' it states, 'Young people should be made aware that Islam does not require them to put their futures in jeopardy.' An assumption that fasting has a detrimental effect on GCSE results. Schools teaching what Islam does require or does not.

In the section, 'Devotion and Prayers' it states, 'Children and their parents or carers should be informed that **extra devotions in Ramadan are voluntary**; whereas for a child or young person to perform well in exams and tests given their consequences, **is obligatory.**' ASCL have added a farḍ upon children and young people which cannot be found in the Qur'ān or Aḥādīth. So not only are outlier positions being portrayed as reliable, scripture is being re-written.

I will not even address the suggestion of a shorter fasting time based on Makka or Madina as that suggestion shows a lack of understanding of basic principles of fiqh.

In the section 'Ramadan and Performance' we finally see some evidence for why the ACSL information paper is suggesting primary and secondary pupils should not fast near exams.

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'Fasting and staying up late for prayers **may affect** memory, focus, concentration and academic performance.' So Muslim students are advised to break a compulsory fast on information as unsound as above? ACSL can only present one piece of research by Hessel Oosterbeek Bas van der and Klaauw called Ramadan, fasting and educational outcomes. However, even that is far from satisfactory, as it was carried out on Muslim university students not secondary school students; and the conclusion they reached, 'students fasting during Ramadan **may be** disadvantaged in their exam performance,' was inconclusive. That is the sum of the research on which the complete Information Paper is based.

Allow me to offer some research which I have kept to a minimum as the fatwā is already longer than I originally desired.

Farooq, A, Herrera C.P., Almudakha, F. and Mansour R. (2015)<sup>2</sup> found 'Ramadan fasting was associated with significant changes in body composition, dietary intake and sleep patterns. Reductions in attention and indices were observed in preteens only.' In fact, they also concluded, 'The findings of this study suggest that although working memory capacity and spatial planning ability was improved by Ramadan fast in children, attention scores were reduced in preteens.' So, teenagers improved due to fasting in Ramadan.

Waterhouse, J. (2010)<sup>3</sup> found 'Therefore, it appears that training is compromised to a small extent only, some aspects of training (e.g. sprinting and agility) being comparatively immune.'

Nugraha, B., Ghashang, S. K., Hamdan, I. and Gutenbrunner, C. (2017)<sup>4</sup> found, 'The results revealed that there was no significant differences between the participants in FG (Fasting Group) and the NFG at T1 or T3 for any of the outcomes. Findings demonstrate that Ramadan fasting did not significantly influence mood, fatigue and QoL, when compared to NFG. Even, it gives benefit to fasting group with regard to these parameters.'

I do commend ACSL for Section 5 – Practical Advice for Schools during Fasting, except the first bullet point, as that is what it should be doing rather than acting as a fatwā board.

Finally, I wish to address the list of endorsers – please do not endorse a paper which is outside your field of expertise. To the Muslim scholars I wish to add, you must have read this paper after it was published and yet your name remains. I can think of two possible

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<sup>2</sup> Farooq, A, Herrera C.P., Almudakha, F. and Mansour R. (2015) A Prospective Study of the Physiological and Neurobehavioral Effects of Ramadan Fasting in Preteen and Teenage Boys, Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, pp. 889-97

<sup>3</sup> Waterhouse, J. (2010), Effects of Ramadan on Physical Performance: Chronobiological Considerations, British Journal of Sports Medicine, pp. 509-15

<sup>4</sup> Nugraha, B., Ghashang, S. K., Hamdan, I. and Gutenbrunner, C. (2017), Effect of Ramadan Fasting on Fatigue, Mood, Sleepiness and Health-related Quality of Life of Healthy Young Men in Summer Time in Germany: A Prospective Controlled Study, Appetite – Eating and Drinking, pp 38-45



reasons. Either you do not understand the gravity of what you have endorsed as you are causing confusion amongst the Muslims by suggesting that Muslim students should not fast during Ramadan; or you agree with what is found in the information paper. In, either case, it is clear you are not to be relied upon for offering advice to Traditional Muslims. I would suggest that you retract your endorsement once matters have become clear to you.

As for the matter in hand, the shari'a does permit a Muslim to break his/her fast when a medical expert advises that continuing the fast will have a detrimental impact on their health. This should be by a medical practitioner or one who has been specifically trained to see the signs of dehydration; preferably Muslim as they will be more sympathetic towards the student's faith and what that fast means to them. The parent/carer should be informed that their child is advised to break their fast due to a sound diagnosis of dehydration.

Students should make a timetable balancing revision, prayer and rest and not to unnecessarily exert themselves. They should seek spiritual strength from Allah and that He rewards them for their efforts both in this world and the Hereafter.

والله أعلم وعلمه أتم

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2<sup>nd</sup> Ramadān 1439/18<sup>th</sup> May 2018



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