Dear Dr. Green:

Three years ago, tests for DeKalb County gifted programs were set for the day after Halloween. But when parents objected—noting that their children wouldn't get a good night's sleep after eating candy and staying up late—the school district changed the date of the test.

This story, as told by DeKalb School Board member Stan Jester and his wife Nancy Jester (a former school board member and current DeKalb commissioner), exemplifies why next month's CogAT and ITBS testing must be changed to avoid conflicting with Judaism's most holiest holidays.  Certainly Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—the Jewish new year and day of atonement—deserve equal treatment with Halloween.

This year Jews will observe these days--on which they go to synagogue instead of working or attending school--on Monday and Tuesday Sept 14-15 and Wednesday, Sept. 23.  The testing is scheduled from Sept 9-25.

**If the school district maintains this schedule, it will pressure Jewish families to violate their religious tenets so that their children can have the best chance to qualify for gifted and other special programs.  They shouldn't have to make that choice.**

We are writing on behalf of a large group of concerned Jewish parents from a host of DeKalb schools, who met at B'nai Torah synagogue on Sunday to discuss this problem.

We learned that the testing was moved from October to September: to get test results earlier so that gifted programs could start sooner.  We applaud that goal.  **But achieving it this year, under the current schedule, treats Jews with remarkable insensitivity and subjects teachers and students to costly inefficiency.**

(The schedule also would appear to burden Muslims, who celebrate Eid-al-Adha on Sept. 24, and other religious minorities who have holidays in September.)

One veteran DeKalb teacher who attended our meeting noted that on typical make-up test days, "the assistant principal runs around like crazy" tracking down all of the children who missed tests.  This chaos will surely be more intense this year, given hundreds of Jewish children who will need make-up tests.  Just as examples, it is estimated that Jews make up at least 10 percent of Dunwoody Elementary and about 10 percent of Montgomery Elementary schools.  Parents who have expressed concern with us have children also at Vanderlyn, Austin, Chesnut, Peachtree Middle and other DeKalb schools.

The sheer volume of students missing the exams create logistical challenges for schools to find suitable rooms to conduct makeups.  More importantly, forcing these children to submit to makeup tests further increases their amount of time away from their classrooms.

Consider also that a sizable number of teachers are Jewish, meaning they will miss these days as well.  Given reports that there are 150 teacher vacancies in the system, holding tests on the Jewish high holidays will exacerbate this problem, as the schools will need to find even more teachers to oversee tests.

The issue of unfamiliar teachers giving makeup tests is a particular concern for parents of first graders.  Teachers read the test questions to first graders, but apparently strangers will read the questions for makeup tests, given that homeroom teachers are not pulled to do them.

During recent Curriculum Nights, teachers emphasized the great efforts made so that children are comfortable and focused on test days.  We can only assume that removing children from class to take make-up tests would be less comfortable and more distracting—especially because some may feel a stigma associated with their religion.

Finally, making it harder for any children to compete for gifted or other programs will cost the schools money, as we understand each child in these programs qualifies their schools for extra grants.  No one wants this result.

Again, we understand why the district wanted to give the tests earlier than in previous years.  However, we question how much earlier results would be available, given that the scores are presented as percentiles of a national sample.  That is, if scores from around the country have to be computed for any percentiles to be drawn, how much earlier can DeKalb hope to receive its results and start forming gifted classes?

Dr. Green, we know you inherited this schedule when you arrived last month, and we're sorry our introduction to you and vice-versa must occur on this challenging issue.  We are impressed with your previous achievements in Kansas City and New York, and we look forward to where you will take our district.

Particularly impressive is your track record on ensuring that all students have the same educational opportunities, notably in your work with the National Council on Educating Black Children and having been featured in Touching the Future: Minorities in Education, speaking on issues of educational equity, access, and achievement.

But we think to avoid the insensitivity and inefficiency described in this letter and ensure that all students have the same opportunities for success, a change must be made to the ITBS testing schedule.

As you noted in your response to Mr. Jester, there are a host of holidays for religious minorities in September.  Your calendar correctly pointed out that in Judaism, there are holidays through October 6.  Therefore we suggest that DeKalb testing be rescheduled along the dates similar to the most recent years, when tests began in the second week of October.

You will be receiving a letter from a group of concerned Atlanta rabbis, and we are confident they can provide you with any guidance you seek on these and future calendars.

Any of us would be glad to speak with you at your convenience as you consider this matter.

We thank you for your consideration, and we look forward to hearing from you.