

American Leaders Against Hate
and Anti-Muslim Bigotry
Policy Recommendations for School Districts



Introduction

The nation's public schools are a cornerstone of our democracy and they should be safe inclusive environments that support all students and treat them with respect. Policies should be established that foster equity, inclusion, and understanding as well as clear pathways for students to redress instances of bullying or discrimination. School board leaders can provide key leadership and guidance through policies that reduce instances of bias in textbooks and curricula, foster tolerance and understanding among students and educators of cultural differences, and ensure support services are available for students that need them.

Policy Recommendations

Explicit religious equity policy

Although public schools are required by federal law to respect their students' constitutional right to religious free exercise, many schools do not have explicit policies affirming the principle of religious equity within the school, or establishing practices to help everyone in the community observe that principle. School boards can either adopt a district-wide policy, or require that each school establish their own policy that meets certain guidelines. Some schools and school districts may already have general anti-discrimination policies in place, which can serve as the starting point for developing a more detailed policy to promote equity among students of different religious backgrounds.

A strong religious equity policy should be articulated clearly in the rules and regulations promulgated by the district and should include:

- A clear statement of the right of all students to be free from discrimination on the basis of their religion, and the duty and commitment of the school district to protect that right.
- A requirement to accommodate students who have religious dress requirements.
- A requirement that schools treat religious and non-religious student groups equally.
- A prohibition against suppressing religious expression by students solely on the grounds that it is religious.
- A commitment to diversity and inclusion in the school curriculum and to ensuring that pedagogical materials are free from religious bias.
- The establishment of a process by which students can file grievances if they believe they have experienced discrimination because of their religion, and a fair and impartial process for investigating and resolving such grievances including potential penalties.
- Requirements that the district track, review and report on complaints of discriminatory treatment within the school district.

Any school district that is home to Muslim students should also consider adding important Muslim holidays to the list of religious holidays observed in the school district. In 2015, **New York**

City schools designated Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha as official holidays on the school calendar, and city public schools will now close on those days when they fall during the school year.¹ Other school districts in Vermont, Massachusetts and New Jersey have similar policies.

Bullying prevention and support services for students

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, nearly one in four students reported having been bullied during the 2013 school year.² Over the last several years, there has been a growing awareness of the problem of bullying among school aged children. As high as this rate is, there is reason to believe it is even higher for Muslim students. A 2015 report by the Council on American Islamic Relations found that 55% of Muslim students surveyed in California schools experienced bullying or discrimination.³

School districts should establish formal anti-bullying policies that guide schools to create learning environments where bullying is less likely and where students who have been bullied are given the support they need. School district policies on bullying should be codified and should include:

- A definition of bullying that takes into account the full range of behaviors that may constitute bullying (this should include both physical and verbal acts of aggression or manipulation), and the variety of contexts in which it may occur (this should explicitly mention cyber-bullying).
- Clear steps for teachers, staff, and students to follow when they observe bullying taking place.
- Clear steps for students who experience bullying to take to seek protection, support and redress.
- Procedures for investigating and imposing consequences for acts of bullying or harassment.
- Regular programming designed to raise awareness about bullying, reduce complicity by staff and students in observed bullying, and increase connectedness among students.
- Specific support systems for students who, because of their race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability are more likely to become targets of bullying. Regular training for staff to ensure the quality of these services.

¹ "New York City Adds 2 Muslim Holidays to Public School Calendar." Michael Grynbaum and Sharon Otterman, *The New York Times*. March 4, 2015. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/05/nyregion/new-york-to-add-two-muslim-holy-days-to-public-school-calendar.html? r=0>

² "Student Reports of Bullying and Cyber-Bullying: Results from the 2013 School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey." U.S. Department of Education, June 2015. Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015056.pdf>

³ "Misabeled: The Impact of School Bullying and Discrimination on California Muslim Students." CAIR California,

Curriculum diversity

While the First Amendment's Establishment Clause prohibits American public schools from endorsing or promoting the practice of any religion, education curriculum should include material on the importance of immigration in American history. It should highlight the history of efforts to exclude immigrants on the basis of race, ethnicity, and national origin and also the history of movements to combat xenophobia and make America more welcoming to immigrants. In developing the school curriculum, school districts should take advantage of any opportunity that state standards leave for educating students about world religions and their impact, and should ensure that this includes the Muslim religion and Islamic peoples and cultures.

Schools should allocate some portion of funds for programming related to teaching about world religions to acquire resources on Islam, and other religions for which there is a resource gap. School libraries should offer books and other academic materials on a wide range of religions, including Islam, and librarians and teachers should be capable of guiding students in the use of these resources. School boards should also require the review of textbooks and other pedagogical material to ensure they are free of anti-Muslim bias.

Professional development for teachers and staff

Without the right resources, even the best-intentioned teachers will not have the tools they need to create a positive and equitable learning environment for their students. School districts must offer opportunities for professional development that will allow teachers and staff to expand their understanding of their students' cultural and religious backgrounds, and to acquire the skills to support students who may become targets of bullying or discrimination. There are a variety of resources that schools can take advantage of in this context, such as:

- Trainings to help teachers and staff recognize their own biases and learn methods for mitigating the impact of implicit bias on their interactions with students.
- Trainings to help teachers and staff identify and skillfully confront discriminatory treatment of students by other students.
- Trainings for teachers who have responsibility for teaching aspects of the curriculum related to Islam and other religions. This should help create strategies for teaching religious subjects in compliance with constitutional limitations and state standards, as well as pedagogical tools that take into account the sensitivity of religious subject matter in classrooms where students come from diverse faith traditions.
- Substantive programming to introduce teachers and staff to the Muslim religion and Islamic culture, and to raise awareness about the particular vulnerabilities of Muslim community members in the currently political climate.
- Specialized training for school guidance counselors and social workers to help them support Muslim students who have experienced bullying or discrimination on the basis of their religion.

Schools should be safe and understanding environments for all students that walk through the doors every day. In an era where diversity is so prevalent in our society, discrimination and bullying must be recognized and addressed, and policies can provide key guidance for students, educators and the school administration. Bias toward students, based on the color of their skin, religion or cultural background, should not be tolerated in our nation's public schools. Our elected officials, whose responsibility it is to ensure students learn in a safe environment, can help establish the norms we need in our districts so this reality exists for all of our students.

Landscape and Resources

The Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance Initiative is for students and educators; the **Islamic Network Group** offers a number of resources on First Amendment compliant curricula to teach about Islamic culture and the Muslim religion, and the **Family and Youth Institute** offers information that fosters greater understanding youth who are Muslim.