

The Illusive Inclusion:

Islamophobia, Discrimination, and Lack of Accommodation in Public Schools



First Bullying Survey and Report of American Muslim Students in Austin-TX



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The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) is the largest American Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States. Its mission is to enhance understanding of Islam, protect civil rights, promote justice and empower American Muslims. CAIR-TX Austin/DFW is a CAIR chapter serving Muslims in Austin, DFW, and around cities.



OUR MISSION

To enhance understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American Muslims and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding.

OUR VISION

To be a leading advocate for justice and mutual understanding.



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Executive Summary

Through this report, the Council on American-Islamic Relations in Austin (CAIR TX-Austin/DFW) provides an analysis and evaluation of the current school climate for American Muslims. The purpose of this report is to understand the extent to which Islamophobia manifests itself in the school environment in the form of bullying and discrimination. As such, this report focuses on anti-Muslim bullying, the unwanted, aggressive behavior among school-aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance that is repeated or can be repeated and is based on the student's Islamic faith.

This Survey is an answer to the recommendation stated in CAIR-DFW Bullying Survey (2020) [1] to continue monitoring anti-Muslim bullying. Extending the survey to Austin is expected to deepen our understanding of the impact of the mass political views on islamophobia and Anti-Muslims bigotry. This is especially important post Trump presidential term. This survey was conducted by the CAIR-Austin/DFW office covering the Greater Austin areas. It reached 68 Muslim students between the ages of 10 and 18 who were enrolled in public and private non-Islamic schools.

The sample included students who attend four different weekend Islamic Schools/Youth Groups. Prior to the survey, students engaged in an interactive presentation about bullying in Public Schools. The presentation covered bullying definition, types of bullying, how a teacher or an administrator can bully a Muslim student and a spectrum of actions that can be taken. Students were given the opportunity to ask questions and then were guided to fill the survey question by question.

Illusive Comfort and Safety

Although the students mostly perceived their schools' environment to be safe and welcoming, other questions revealed a different rhetoric. *Only 11.8% of the students or their parents asked for Friday prayer accommodation and only 20% asked for P.E. Uniform accommodations.* Two accommodations that usually receive resistance based on CAIR-TX reports. In addition, *38.2% experienced at least one offensive statement/post about Islam/Muslims by their school peers on social media and 37.3% witnessed in-person verbal abuse, based on religion, directed towards Muslim students in their schools.* More seriously, *almost 1 in 4 students reported that other Muslim students in their schools got physically harmed for being Muslims.*

Regarding teachers and school staff, *64.7% of students reported that teachers are not completely factual and neutral when mentioning Islam/Muslims in a lesson and when students approach a school staff after a bullying incident, 86.2% of them reported the issue was not completely resolved.*

Cyberbullying involves posting or sending electronic messages, including text, pictures or videos, aimed at harassing, threatening or targeting another person through a variety of media and social media platforms. Given the high level of Cyberbullying, physical and verbal abuse; and the lack of appropriate accommodations for Muslim students, our office plans to continue monitoring Anti-Muslims bullying and creates a report biannually.

Limitations:

The sample size is quite small and included only students who attend weekend Islamic Schools or Islamic Center youth groups which usually attract practicing Muslim families. The sample can be more inclusive by reaching out to more Muslim gatherings such as cultural and Eid fests. Also, 79% of the sample is Middle School students. More creative ways to reach High School students need to be generated for the future. Although the survey questions are comprehensive and cover all kind of bullying, discriminations, and plausible accommodations, the data collected is quantitative data except for the last question that allowed students to write freely about the islamophobia issues in the educational materials. Moreover, Parents Anti-Bullying presentations in the community brought up more specific issues and challenges. Hence, more qualitative data such as interviews or group discussion should be considered for the next report.

Qualitative data may include more specific topics such as Palestinian/ Israeli conflict, anonymous bullying reports, fear of backlash, parents' confidence in talking to school administrators, September 11th classroom discussion, Muslim leaders' engagement, and parenting styles. Interestingly, 22% of the students attend Charter Schools. Although Charter Schools are Public Schools, it is good to understand why almost 1 in 4 Muslim families prefer Charter Schools over regular Public Schools and analyze their data separately. Qualitative data is expected to give a context to the quantitative data, enhance our understanding, and sharpen our recommendations.

Islamophobia at Schools

Bias Curricula and Misconceptions

American Muslim students should be given the opportunity to thrive in a school environment that cultivates feelings of inclusion instead of re-enforcing feelings of otherness. Schools foster this feeling of otherness for American Muslim students by institutionalizing certain cultural practices above others in curricula, pedagogies, and instruction. In the post 9/11 context, American Muslim students face constant obstacles to exercising their religion, while also bearing the burden of defending their religious identity, which is frequently undercut by the stereotypical misunderstandings of Islam and Muslims. Learning improves when educators provide a more unbiased approach to education about Islam and Muslims, which can be achieved by having educators re-examine their prejudices and be open-minded and aware of how cultural interpretations affects learning.

A simple solution for educators and schools is to incorporate lesson plans and materials created by Muslim organizations for curricula about Islam. Educators should utilize specific lesson plans that address common misconceptions about Islam, the history of Muslims in the U.S., Muslim contributions to civilizations and commonalities between Islam and other faiths. Although Texas schools have made affirmative efforts to reflect the state's diversity in its common core curriculum, many of those changes ignore the need to revise the approach to education about Muslims and Islam.

Unfortunately, many attempts by school districts across the nation to incorporate a more unbiased curriculum on Islam have been met with backlash, where the less informed accuse schools of imposing the indoctrination of Islam on non-Muslim students or being pro-Islam [2]. The continued use of outdated materials in schools reinforces misconceptions about Islam and further perpetuates Islamophobia.

Lake of Religious Accommodations

Receiving religious accommodation positively impacts a student's perception of their environment. "It makes you feel you belong here," stated a Muslim high school senior when her school provided Muslim students with a prayer room to perform daily prayers [3]. Failure of K-12 schools to allow for religious accommodations for Muslim students is a common complaint from parents and students when contacting CAIR-TX Austin/DFW [4].

Furthermore, allowing for reasonable religious accommodations promotes the further inclusion of Muslim students in schools and discourages feelings of isolation and otherness. It is well established that being aware of and moving to eliminate bias in the classroom can promote equity, excellence and empowerment [5].

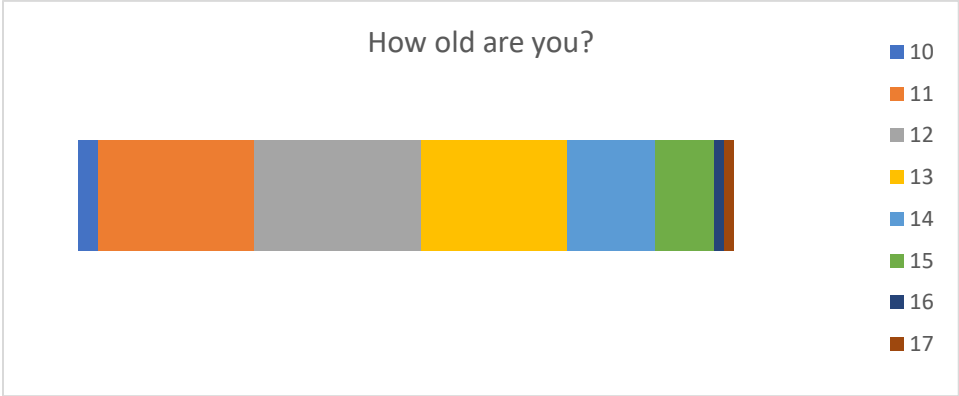
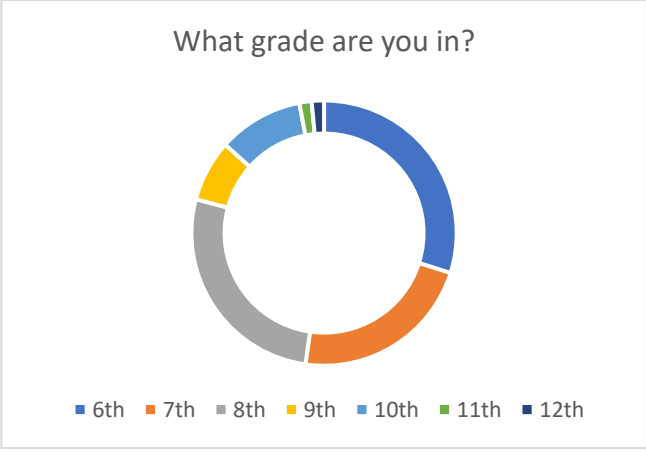
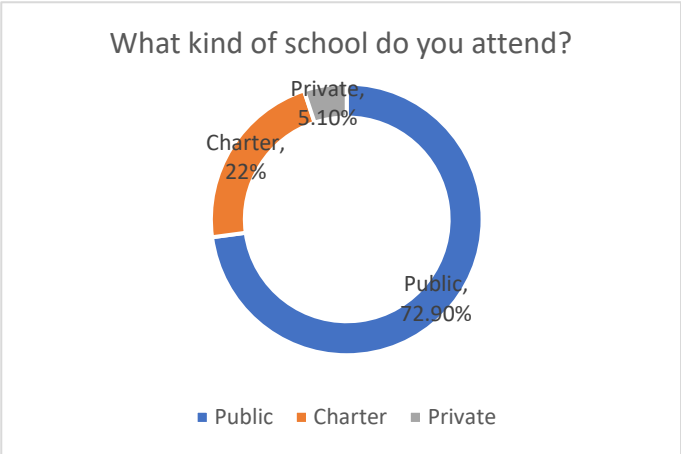
When institutions ignore or dismiss requests for religious accommodations, they perpetuate the feeling of not belonging for Muslim students who are then forced to choose between their religious practices and curricular activities. In a July 2016 Report prepared by the Department of Justice (DOJ) entitled “Combating Religious Discrimination Today: Final Report,” the government recognized that there is a need to ensure that students have access to reasonable religious accommodations [6].

The report further recognized the importance of individualized accommodations for religious beliefs, including excusal from school for religious holidays, religious clothing exceptions to school dress codes and accommodations for prayer during the school day [7]. Thus, it is imperative that federal, state and local school boards and districts work with American Muslims to ensure schools recognize the importance of religious accommodations in the school setting. Common accommodations requests from Muslim students include allowing for alternative uniforms during a physical education class and breaks during the school day to carry out prayers and excusing absences due to observance of Eid holiday.

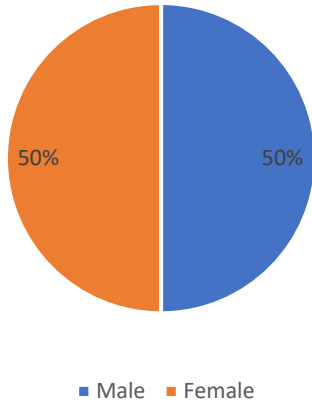
Survey Findings

In 2022, CAIR-TX Austin/DFW surveyed 68 students between the ages of 10 and 18 who were enrolled in Public and non-Islamic Private Schools throughout the Austin-TX Metroplex. The 2022 survey served as part of a project launched by CAIR-California, who have been actively surveying Muslim students in that state for the last eight years. Over the years, CAIR-CA has modified the surveys to better understand the difficulties that Muslim students experience in the face of bullying and discrimination at school. The CAIR-TX Austin/DFW survey is based on the CAIR-CA survey. The 2022 survey is divided into three main sections: a) individual demographic information, b) students' perception of school environment, and c) bullying and discrimination experienced at school as either the target or bystander.

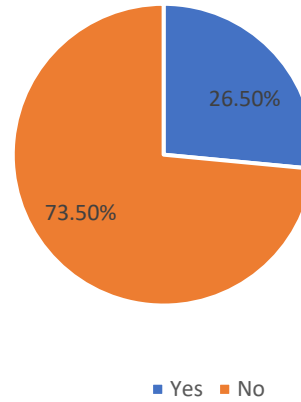
Demographic Data



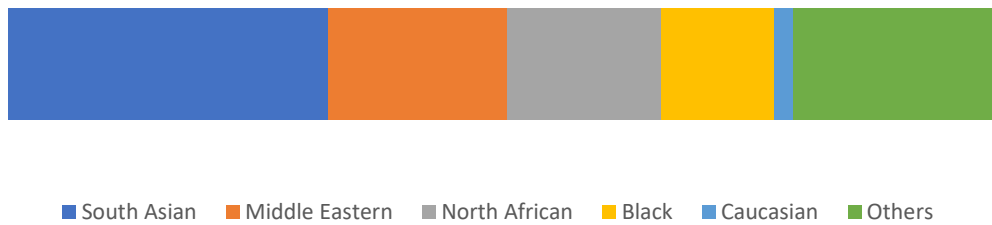
What is your gender?



Is English the primary language spoken at your home?



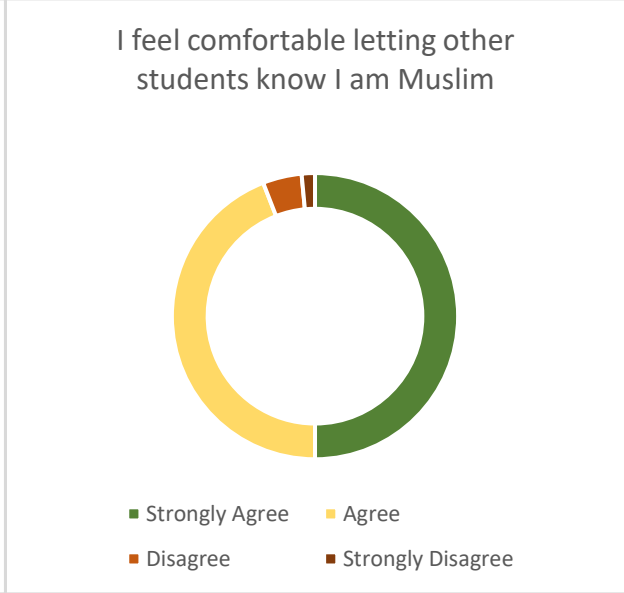
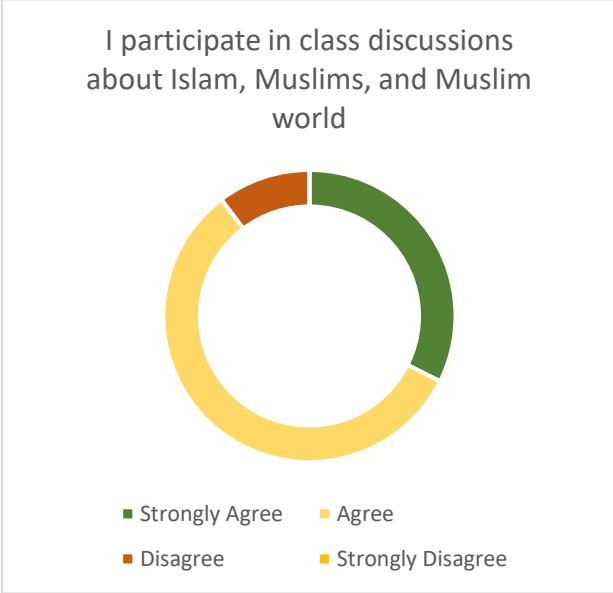
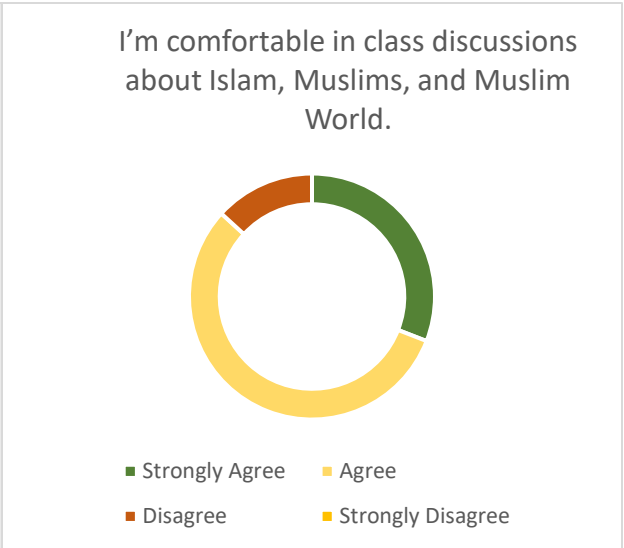
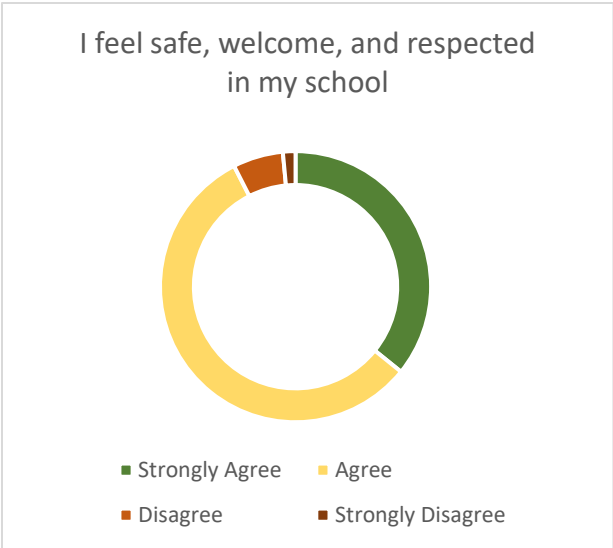
Which ethnicity group you most identify with?



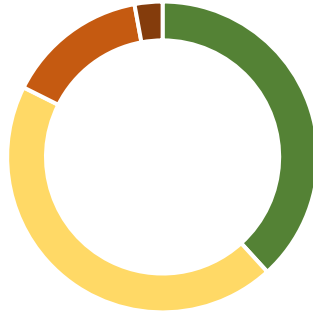
Muslim families are double or triple minorities given that only 1 of 68 students reported being Caucasian and almost 3 of 4 families speak a language other than English at home.



School Environment

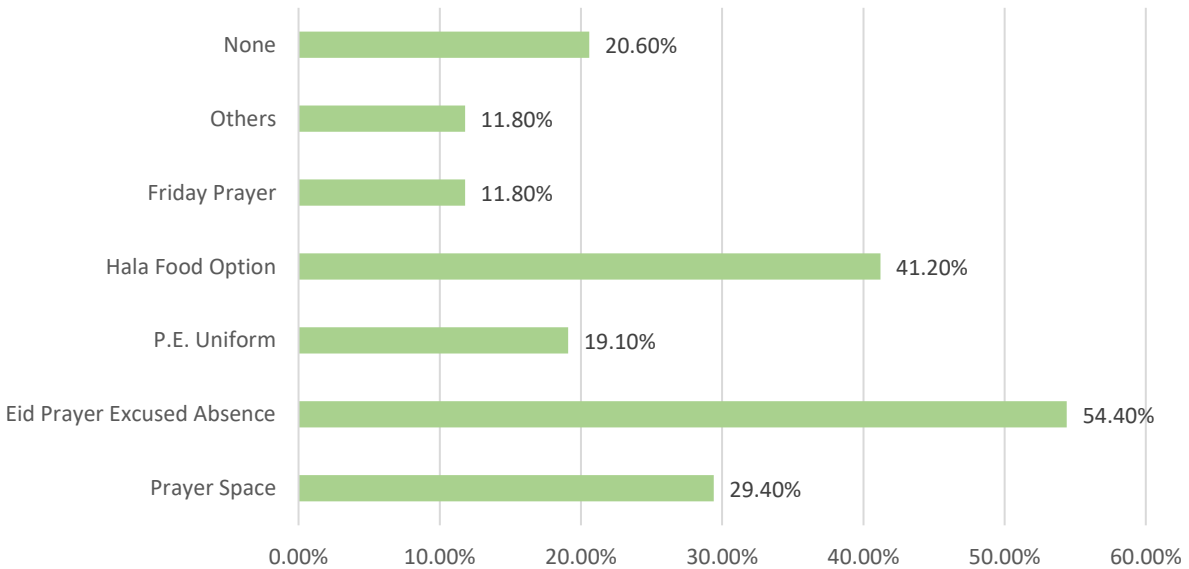


I feel comfortable approaching my teachers and administrators about my religious needs



■ Strongly Agree ■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly Disagree

My parents or I have requested the following from a teacher, administrator or other official at my school



Bullying and Discrimination

How often do students at your school make offensive statements or posts about Islam and Muslims on social media?



■ Never ■ Rarely ■ Sometimes ■ Often ■ V. Often

Has a student from your school made offensive comments about Muslims/Islam directed towards YOU either in-person or through social media?



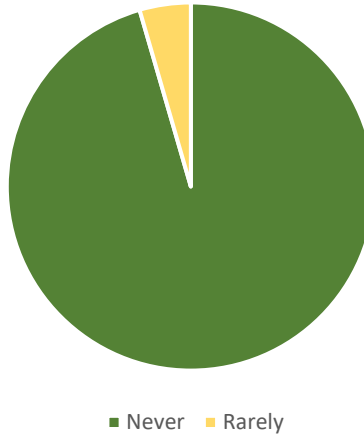
■ Never ■ Rarely ■ Sometimes ■ Often ■ V. Often

How often is a student at your school made fun of, verbally insulted or verbally abused for being Muslim?

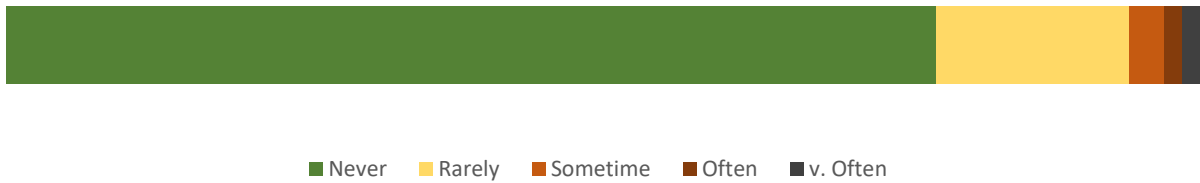


■ Never ■ Rarely ■ Sometimes ■ Often ■ V. Often

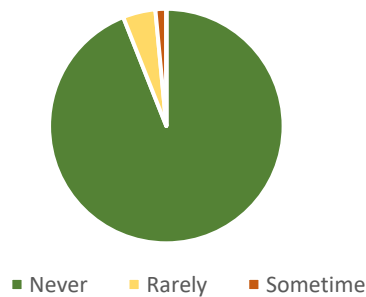
How often are you physically harmed at your school because you are Muslim?



How often are others at your school physically harmed or harassed for being Muslim?



How often have you had your hijab tugged, pulled or in any way offensively touched by another student?



How often do teachers, administrators or other officials at your school mention your religion or speak about Islam/Muslims?



■ Never ■ Rarely ■ Sometime ■ Often ■ V. Often

When your teachers have mentioned Islam or Muslims in a lesson, did they do so in a neutral, fair, and factual manner?



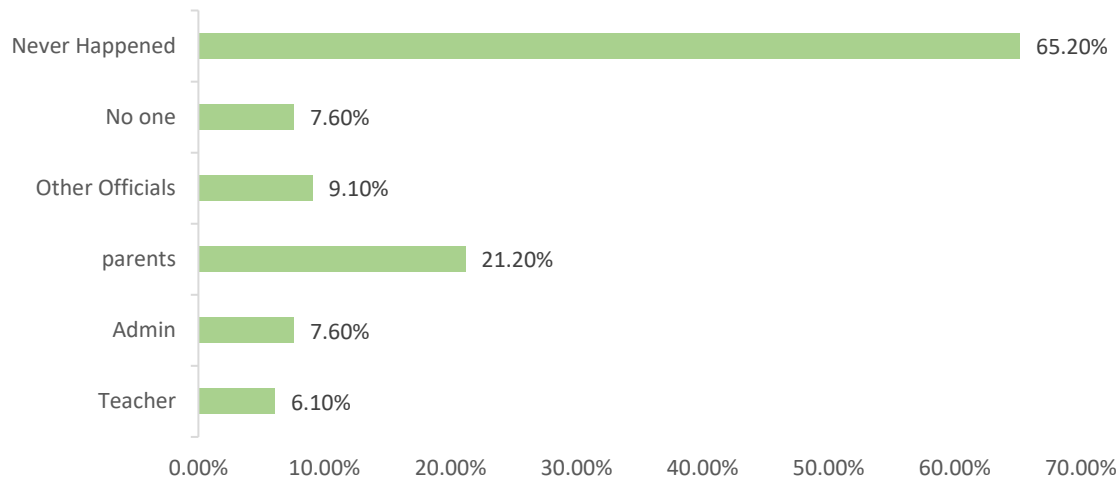
■ Yes ■ most part ■ Sometime ■ Not Really ■ Not at All

How often have your teachers mentioned the subjects of Jihad, Shariah, or Terrorism?

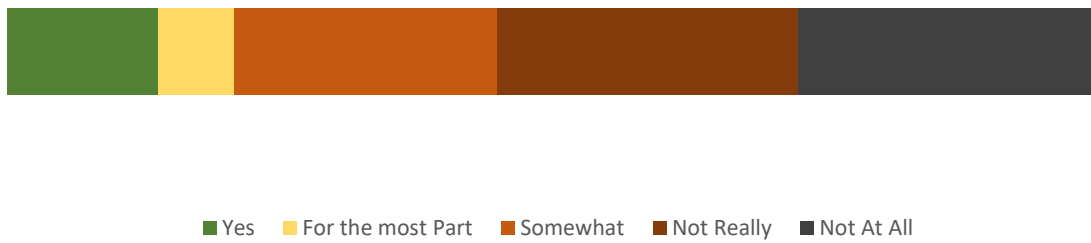


■ Never ■ Rarely ■ Sometime ■ Often ■ V. Often

When incidents of harassment directed towards Muslims occur at your school, who did you tell about it?



When you told a teacher, administrator, or other official at your school about an incident of harassment directed towards Muslims, did it help solve the problem?



Recommendations

CAIR-TX Austin/DFW

CAIR Austin staff already reach out to Islamic Centers to deliver an Anti-bullying presentation for students who attend public schools. Another presentation geared toward their parents are provided as well and tackles topics like positive parenting, and effective ways to communicate with the school staff. In the future, we will continue conducting the survey biannually and produce similar reports. It might be helpful to work with the ISDs to provide education and raise awareness against islamophobia among teachers, administrators, and students. CAIR staff can serve as faith and cultural consultants for ISDs to create more multicultural inclusive environment. Finally, we will keep building connections with Muslim families and receive their complaints regarding Curricula and bullying incidents in the Public Schools system. We cannot perform without the support of our community and spiritual leaders. Spiritual leaders connect with the families daily, listen and council, encourage parents to ask for appropriate accommodations, write informative letters to schools when needed, and contact CAIR-TX staff in case of bullying incidents.

Parents and Students

We encourage parents to continue building a positive relationship with their children. We advise parents to avoid asking ‘why’ questions when incidents happen and focus more on ‘what’, ‘when’, ‘where’, ‘who’, and ‘how’ questions. Also, parents need to continue learning effective ways of communication with the different school’s staff and always ask for consequences and what the school can do to prevent this from happening again. Being aware of cultural and linguistic barriers is a key point for success. Finally, parents should be the school’s ally and offer support by sharing authentic resources, speaking at the classrooms, and attending parents’ meetings to discuss reasonable religious accommodations.

We ask Muslim students attending Public Schools to trust their instinct; and learn the definition of bullying, its different types, and the ways it manifests in public schools whether from other peers or from a teacher/administrator. Target students should tell someone and never stay silent. Muslim students can raise awareness in their schools about the importance of being a bystander and safe ways to do so. Finally, we call all Muslim students to report any misconception, or stereotyping they encounter in their curricula to CAIR-TX office.

Educators

School administrators should assess the school’s environment by surveying teachers, students, counselors, coaches and parents about their views about Islam and Muslims [8] in order to implement a policy-based action plan. The action plan can include training school administrators and teachers; and working to engage Muslim families in the school’s community. Educators should foster a diverse and multicultural environment to create an inclusive environment for all students. It is important for educators to be familiar not only with the racial, ethnic, sexual and gender identities, but also with the various religious identities of their students.

Another component of the action plan should be prevention and response procedures to incidents of bullying. Policies should clearly define what bullying and harassment is, including setting standards and thresholds for verbal bullying. Action plans should consider how to incorporate bystander involvement in preventing bullying instead of acting as passive observers. Likewise, school policies should implement procedures on how teachers should intervene in preventing bullying incidents and ensure that teachers receive training on how to prevent bullying and harassment in their classrooms. Teachers often report that they do not have sufficient training to address such incidents [9].

Moreover, reflection on ones' beliefs and prejudice and how it affects pedagogies and instruction should be a basic component of teachers' certification programs. Finally, teachers and school staff professional development should authentic information regarding appropriate religious accommodations for Muslims and not to leave it all on the shoulders of parents and students to explain their religious need.

Law Makers

Federal legislators and state lawmakers should ensure that the appropriate laws are passed to protect vulnerable students from bullying and violence at school [10]. Congress should amend Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to prohibit discrimination based on religion, which is already prohibited by Texas law. Amending Title VI would allow targets of religious based bullying to seek redress against schools receiving federal funding and would allow for accountability for failing to prevent bullying and harassment based on religion.

Additionally, there are currently no federal law directly addressing bullying. As such, Congress should pass the Safe Schools Improvement Act (SSIA) of 2017. The act would prohibit bullying and harassment based on a student's religion, race, color, national origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity [11]. This bill amends the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 to require states to direct their local educational agencies (LEAs) to establish policies that prevent and prohibit conduct, including bullying and harassment, that is sufficiently severe, persistent or pervasive that: (1) limit students' ability to participate in, or benefit from, school programs; or (2) create a hostile or abusive educational environment that adversely affects students' education[12]. School districts would then be required to adopt codes of conduct specifically prohibiting bullying and harassment.

SSIA would also require that states report data on bullying and harassment to the Department of Education [13]. The Department of Education would then be required to provide Congress with a biennial report on the state reported data from the programs and policies to combat bullying and harassment in elementary and secondary schools [14]. The National Center for Education Statistics would collect this state data to determine the incidence and frequency of the conduct prohibited by LEA disciplinary policies [15].

RESOURCES

WEBSITES WITH BULLYING PREVENTION RESOURCES

Korematsu Institute

<http://www.korematsuinstitute.org/curriculum-kit-materials/>

WhyIslam

www.WhyIslam.org

Sikh Coalition

<https://www.sikhcoalition.org/>

Act to Change

<https://acttochange.org/>

Islamic Networks Group (ING)

www.ing.org

National Education Association

www.nea.org

National Crime Prevention Council

www.ncpc.org

PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center

www.pacer.org

Teaching Tolerance: A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center

www.teachingtolerance.org

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services

www.stopbullying.gov

Crisis Text Line

www.crisistextline.org

REPORTS ON BULLYING AND PREVENTION

Know Your Rights as a Muslim Youth

At School, CAIR-California

<https://ca.cair.com/sfba/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Kids-Know-Your-Rights-Pocket-Guide.pdf>

MISLABELED: The Impact of School

Bullying and Discrimination, CAIR-California

<https://ca.cair.com/sfba/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/CAIR-CA-2015-Bullying-Report-Web.pdf>

Growing in Faith: CA Muslim Youth

Experiences with Bullying, CAIR-CA

<http://ca.cair.com/downloads/GrowingInFaith.pdf>

Institute for Social Policy and

Understanding (ISPU)

<https://www.ispu.org/social-policy/youth/>

Bullying Prevention Guide, Islamic Networks Group

http://www.ing.org/downloads/ING_Bullying_Prevention_Guide.pdf

Go Home Terrorist, Asian American Legal

Defense and Education Fund & Sikh

Coalition

[http://www.sikhcoalition.org/
documents/pdf/go-home-terrorist.pdf](http://www.sikhcoalition.org/documents/pdf/go-home-terrorist.pdf)

State of American Muslim Youth:
Research & Recommendations, Institute for
Social Policy and Understanding
[http://www.ispu.org/pdfs/ISPU_FYI_
Report_American_Muslim_Youth_Final.
pdf](http://www.ispu.org/pdfs/ISPU_FYI_Report_American_Muslim_Youth_Final.pdf)

TEXAS LAWS RELATING TO BULLYING

Texas Education Code §37.0832
(Bullying Prevention Policies and
Procedures)

FEDERAL LAWS RELATING TO HARASSMENT

Disability

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of
1973.

Title II of the Americans with
Disabilities Act of 1990

Race, Color & National Origin

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964

Sex

Title IX of the Education Amendments
of 1972

STATE & FEDERAL GOVERNMENT REPORTING AGENCIES

Department of Education Office of
Civil Rights
[www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/
index.html](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html)

Department of Justice Civil Rights
Division
www.justice.gov/crt/

END NOTES

[1] CAIR DFW Bullying Report 2020, available at: <http://www.cairdfw.org/media/attachments/2020/02/25/cair-tx-dfw-bullying-report.pdf>

[2] Emma Green, “The Fear of Islam in Tennessee Public Schools,” The Atlantic, December 15, 2015, available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/12/fear-islam-tennessee-public-schools/420441/>; Matt Katz, “Allegations of Islam Indoctrination in Public Schools Spread to New Jersey,” WNYC News, April 10, 2017, available at: <http://www.wnyc.org/story/allegations-islam-indoctrination-public-schools-spread-nj/>.

[3] Helmut Schmidt, “‘It makes you feel you belong’: Schools provide Muslim students space, time for daily prayers,” Duluth News Tribune, February 19, 2017, available at: <http://www.duluthnewstribune.com/news/4220776-it-makes-you-feel-you-belong-schools-provide-muslim-students-space-time-daily-prayers>.

[4] CAIR-TX Annual Report 2021, available at: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/0fa7rjj2orp5ay1/Complete%20Annual%20Report%20Ramadan%20-%20CAIR-TX%20CN.pdf?dl=0>

[5] Laura Mahalingappa, Terri Rodriguez, Nihat Polat, Supporting Muslim Students, A Guide to Understanding the Diverse Issues of Today’s

Classrooms, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, pg. 129.

[6] U.S. Department of Justice, Combating Religious Discrimination Today: Final Report, July 2016, available at: <https://www.justice.gov/crt/file/877936/download>.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Laura Mahalingappa, Terri Rodriguez, Nihat Polat, Supporting Muslim Students, A Guide to Understanding the Diverse Issues of Today’s Classrooms, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, pg. 114-115.

[9] Leslie Tillerson, “Teachers Say That Training Must Support Laws,” Michigan State University School of Journalism, The New Bullying, February 13, 2012, available at: <http://news.jrn.msu.edu/bullying/2012/02/13/teacher-anti-bullying-training-schools/>.

[10] Erica L. Green, “Education Dept. Says It Will Scale Back Civil Rights Investigations,” The New York Times, June 16, 2017, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/16/us/politics/education-department-civil-rights-betsy-devos.html?mcubz=0>.

[11] Safe Schools Improvement Act of 2017, H.R. 1957, 115th Congress (2017-2018), bill summaries available at: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/1957/>.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.