

An Educator's Guide to Islamic Religious Practices



About CAIR

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.

Like the rest of the American population, the American Muslim population is very diverse and includes multiple races, ethnicities, and cultures.

In the current political context, misinformation about Islam, and Islamophobia, have been publicly spread and openly endorsed. This has led to an increasingly hostile climate towards Muslims in America. According to statistics compiled by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), In 2017, there was a 17 percent increase in anti-Muslim bias incidents and a 15 percent increase in hate crimes against American Muslims, compared to the previous year.²

In a recent poll, 48 percent of American Muslims reported having experienced at least one incident of discrimination in the past 12 months.³

These disturbing statistics reveal not only that religious based bullying is a prevalent issue, but also that schools and educators frequently fail to adequately respond when issues arise. CAIR -Philadelphia has found that schools are routinely falling short of their legal duties to support their Muslim student. These trends, the increase in bullying, discrimination, and hate incidents are the tangible result of divisive and hateful rhetoric. They are also products of a lack of knowledge about Islam and the practices of its followers.

This guide is intended as a resource of information on Islam and Muslims to help educators maintain a safe space where students are free and comfortable to learn.

It also contains information on the relevant laws that pertain to religious freedom and prohibit discrimination based on religion in public schools. Ensuring Muslim students have a welcoming and safe environment in which they can learn is not just a professional obligation, but also a legal obligation.

Disclaimer: The materials contained herein are not intended to, and do not constitute legal advice. Readers should not act on the information provided without seeking professional legal counsel. Neither transmission nor receipt of these materials creates an attorney-client relationship between the author and the receiver. The information contained in this booklet is designed to inform educators about the sincerely-held and/or religiously mandated practices/beliefs of Muslim students, which at times require educators to provide religious accommodations in compliance with state and federal laws.

Glossary of Islamic Terms

- **Allah:** “God” in Arabic
- **Eid:** Two major religious celebrations, Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, commemorating important events in the Muslim year
- **Halal:** Commonly understood to mean “permissible”, signals what is acceptable in Islamic practice
- **Hijab:** “Barrier” or “partition”, often used to refer to the headscarf worn by some Muslim women
- **Islam:** Commonly translated as “peace through God’s guidance”, the proper name for the religion of Muslims
- **Jum’ah:** Friday prayer, required for those who are able to attend
- **Kufi:** A cap worn by some Muslim men
- **Masjid:** “Mosque” in Arabic, the Muslim house of worship
- **Muslim:** Follower of Islam
- **Prophet:** An individual believed to be chosen by God to deliver two messages: 1) God alone should be worshipped and 2) people should strive to live ethically by treating others as they wish to be treated
- **Quran or Qur’an or Koran:** The Holy Book of Islam, which is believed to be the word of God
- **Ramadan:** The lunar month in which Muslims are required to fast from dawn to dusk, and be especially mindful of other sins
- **Sharia or Shari’ah:** An evolving, living system of Islamic legal principles and ethical standards, which extends to one’s relationship with one’s neighbors, the state, God, and one’s conscious
- **Wuhdu:** Ritual washing required before prayer, requires running water in order to cleanse hands, feet, and face



Five Common Misconceptions About Islam⁶:

All or most Muslims are from the Middle East.

Globally, only one in five Muslims is from the Middle East. The largest Muslim populations are in Africa and Asia.⁷ In the U.S., more than 60 percent of American Muslims are immigrants, with 70 percent of this population being U.S. citizens.⁸ American Muslims are as ethnically and racially diverse as the American population, with 28 percent of American Muslims identifying as Asian, 20 percent as Black, and 8 percent as Hispanic.⁹

“Allahu Akbar” indicates imminent danger.

“Allahu Akbar” translates to “Allah is the greatest” and is used as a celebration of life – such as a birth – to indicate gratitude, and to celebrate God’s greatness.

“Jihad” refers to violence committed in the name of Islam.

“Jihad” means “to struggle” and alludes to the struggle, individual or communal, to become closer to God through overcoming adversity and striving to be one’s best self. There are two types of jihad, internal, which is the struggle to become a better person, and external, which is the struggle to make the world a better place.

Muslims are particularly prone to violence and/or to support terrorism.

According to a recent poll, 41 percent of Americans believe Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence among its followers.¹⁰ This belief is unsubstantiated by data, as the vast majority of Muslims around the world are peaceful individuals who suffer from violence and terrorism more than non-Muslims.



Moreover, numerous reports have confirmed that, in the U.S., white, right-wing, non-Muslim terrorists pose a greater danger than radical Islamists, both in number of attacks and deadliness of attacks." Muslim scholars have long defined Islam as a religion of peace and the killing of innocent people or civilians is one of the greatest sins an individual can commit under Islam.

Islam oppresses women.

Most oppression of women that receives attention as being perpetrated by Muslims is not related to their adherence to Islam, but rather tied to local customs and traditions. Muslim women have held high leadership positions in Muslim majority countries including president and prime minister. Islam forbids violence of any kind towards women and promotes care for widows, orphans, and the poor. Finally, the Quran supports the equal status of men and women, by stating that "women have rights over men, similar to those of men over women" – Quran 2:228.

Anti-Muslim Bullying

CAIR's biennial bullying reports publishes data regarding the rate of bullying American Muslim students. Our California Chapter's report defines anti-Muslim bullying as unwanted, aggressive behavior among school-aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance that is or can be repeated and is based on the student's Islamic faith. ¹²Disturbingly, the rate of students who have reported being bullied has continued to increase steadily in each of CAIR chapters' published reports.

The 2016 survey reached 1,041 Muslim students between the ages of 11 and 18 who were enrolled in public and private schools throughout California to examine how they felt about their school environment, and the extent of anti-Muslim bullying and harassment they experience. According to the survey:

- Muslim students face discrimination and bullying at more than double the national rate for all students, with 53 percent of respondents reporting that students are made fun of, verbally insulted, or abused for being Muslim.¹³
- Only 69 percent of respondents reported feeling welcome and respected in school. Additionally, only 61 percent of the Muslim students surveyed feel comfortable engaging in class discussions about Islam and Muslims.
- Worryingly, 57 percent of the 2016 respondents reported that students from school make offensive statements and online posts about Islam and Muslims. Teachers and administrators should be particularly sensitive to this environment.
- Critically, school and district employees must be aware of their own actions as 38 percent of 2016 respondents reported bullying and discrimination from teachers, administrators, or other officials.

Educators have an obligation to maintain a safe learning environment where all students feel able to participate. The following suggestions aim to assist educators in taking steps to eradicate anti-Muslim bullying on their campuses.¹⁴

- Never write-off name-calling or jokes as “harmless.” These are often hurtful to the target and, if allowed to go unaddressed, may teach students that such behavior is acceptable or condoned and could lead to harsher forms of harassment.
- Be aware of power dynamics. Be particularly sensitive to language or actions that reflect discrimination in mainstream media and/or society. These should be directly addressed to explain to students why such behavior is intolerant, wrong, and unacceptable.
- Celebrate diversity at school.
- Get to know students' backgrounds.
 - Be considerate when teaching or discussing historical or cultural lessons that may be complex in nature. Remember that these lessons may involve sensitive and personal issues for some of your students.
 - Encourage students to speak about issues they personally relate to, without pressure and without representing them as the spokesperson for all similarly-situated people.
 - Review external reading material for bias with an oversight diversity committee.



Legal Framework

Federal and state laws provide protection for students, including mandating religious accommodations where necessary and protecting students from bullying. Educators should be fully aware of the laws and their implications.

United States Constitution

First Amendment to the Constitution: establishes freedom of religious practice and the separation of church and state in order to guarantee this freedom.

Implications:

- State actors, including teachers and school administrators, cannot encourage or promote religious or anti-religious activity such as school sponsored prayer.
- Any teaching about religion must be done objectively and cannot advance or inhibit any religion. Religions should be taught in similar manners with similar resources committed to lesson plans.
- Protects the right to be Muslim and maintain religious practices in school such as clothing choices and prayer.

Federal Laws

Title IV of the Civil Rights Act (42 U.S.C. §2000 et seq.) (1964): prohibits discrimination based on religion in public primary and secondary schools, as well as in public colleges and universities.

Implications:

- A school must take immediate and appropriate action to investigate or otherwise determine the extent of any student-on-student harassment the school knows of or reasonably should know of.

- If harassment occurred, a school must take prompt and effective steps reasonably calculated to end the harassment, eliminate any hostile environment, and prevent its recurrence.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act (42 U.S.C. § 2000 et seq.): prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, and national origin in programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance.

Implications:

- Although religion is not specifically enumerated, this statute applies to anti-Muslim harassment as it is often based on shared ancestry of ethnic characteristics.
- Schools that fail to follow federal anti-discrimination policies are at risk of forfeiting their federal funding.

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (20 U.S.C. § 6301 et seq.) (1965): conditions school districts' funding on written certification that it does not have any policies that prevent or deny participation in constitutionally protected prayer.

Implications:

- Protects the right of students to meet and pray together during the school day and on school grounds.
- Guarantees the right of students of all faiths to have a similar platform for their religious expression.

Examples of actions that may violate federal law:

- A teacher harassing a student because of the student's faith, or a school's deliberate indifference and/or failure to respond, to pervasive faith-based harassment from other students.
- Suppression of students' religious exercise, such as the denial of a group of Muslim students' request for space to perform midday prayers during lunch period.
- Refusal of a student's request to wear hijab (a religious headscarf) at school; or enforcement of a schools uniform policy which requires Muslim students to remove their hijabs.
- Penalizing a student for missing school due to the observance of religious holiday.

Equal Access Act (20 U.S.C. § 4071 et seq.) (1984): affirms the right of student-initiated religious activities in public schools.

Implications:

- Religious clubs must be allowed and afforded the same access to resources, i.e. space, as other student-run, non-curricular clubs.



Pennsylvania Law

Pennsylvania Fair Educational Opportunities Act & Pennsylvania Human Relations Act:

These laws provide students a range of protection from discrimination, harassment, intimidation, or bullying on the basis of gender, nationality, race or ethnicity, religion—including all aspects of religious belief, observance, and practice—sexual orientation, and association with a person or group with these actual or perceived characteristics.

Implications:

- Guarantees all pupils the right to participate fully in the educational process, free from discrimination and harassment.
- Places an obligation on schools to combat bias and provide equal educational opportunity.
- Schools should undertake educational activities to counter discriminatory incidents on school grounds and minimize and eliminate a hostile environment.
- All programs or activities conducted by an educational institution that receives or benefits from state financial assistance, or enrolls pupils who receive state student financial aid, must follow Pennsylvania's anti-discrimination policies.

Compliance Tip #1:

Recognize **harassment** – look for harassing conduct, motivated by a protected characteristic (including sex, color, race, religion, national origin), that creates a hostile environment which interferes with a student's ability to participate in or benefit from the opportunities offered by a school.

Public School Code

The Code requires that school districts must have a public bullying/discrimination policy that has adopted a policy that prohibits discrimination, harassment, intimidation, and bullying, and has publicized the policy to pupils, parents, employees, agents of the government board, and the public.

Implications:

- extends to all acts related to school activity or attendance, occurring within a school;
- includes a requirement for school personnel to take immediate steps to intervene if they witness an act of discrimination;
- adopts a process for receiving and investigating complaints;
- includes a timeline to investigate and resolve complaints;
- contains an appeal process, should complainant disagree with the resolution of a complaint;
- and ensures all complainants remain confidential, as appropriate, and are not subjected to retaliation.

Compliance Tip #2:

- [Click here to access Pennsylvania Department of Education's Equity and Inclusion Toolkit](#)



Islamic Religious Practices

Schools and educators should be aware of, and responsive to, certain accommodations which Muslims students may require in order to practice their faith.

Daily Prayer:

Islam prescribes that believers perform prayer five times each day: dawn, noon, afternoon, dusk, and nighttime. The noon and afternoon prayers may regularly fall within school hours. Prayer requires a ritual washing, or wudhu, beforehand. During the act of praying, Muslims recite the prayer either aloud or in silence and stand, bow, and touch their foreheads to the ground, while facing the Kaaba in Mecca. During prayer the worshipper is fully engaged and should not be interrupted.

In Islam, congregational worship is on a Friday, with mosques holding midday prayer and sermon called Jum'ah, which lasts approximately an hour.

Educators can accommodate students by providing:

- A clean and quiet space for prayer.
- Muslim students with a short break to pray.
- Access to running water for students to perform wudhu.
- An extended lunch period or temporary release to students who wish to attend Jum'ah.



Prayer

- Allow Muslim students to pray in unused rooms.
- Provide them with privacy and space, as well as a clean place to perform ritual washing.



Ramadan and Fasting:

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, during which most Muslims observe religious fasting.

Fasting includes refraining from eating, drinking, smoking, and intimate contact from dawn to sunset. Ramadan is also

a period when Muslims increase their focus on personal restraint, proper conduct, and empathy with the less fortunate through giving to charity and engagement in local projects. Although Muslims are not required to fast until the age of puberty, many choose to participate at a younger age.

Educators should consider celebrating diversity by allowing a student or guest speaker to explain the traditions and practices of Ramadan. This will provide an important learning opportunity and allow Muslim students to feel comfortable in fasting while at school.

Educators can show sensitivity to fasting students by:

- Excusing them from strenuous physical activity.
- Allowing them to spend lunchtime somewhere where others are not eating.

Dietary Requirements:

Muslims refrain from consuming alcohol, pork, and any pork by-products or derivatives. Some Muslims choose to adhere to “Halal” standards for meat and poultry slaughter and preparation.

Schools should indicate, with a clear, age-appropriate marker, if a food item contains any of the following objectional products or ingredients:

- Pork, including: pepperoni, sausage, hot dogs, or bacon
- Animal shortening
- Gelatin, including: jello and gummy bears/worms
- Lard
- Ingredients containing alcohol, such as vanilla extract and Dijon mustard

Schools with a high number of Muslim students should consider the demand for halal food and offer it alongside other options such as kosher and vegan.



Pork and Pork By-products in Lunches

- Mark items with a red dot or a picture of a pig.
- Provide alternate lunch options, such as vegetarian meals and snacks.

Personal Modesty:

Muslims believe that an emphasis on modesty encourages society to value individuals for their wisdom, skills, and contribution to the community, rather than physical attractiveness. Individuals interpret what this means for themselves differently, according to cultural, ethical, regional, and personal interpretations of modesty.

Men and boys may choose to wear clothing that covers from the navel to the knee. Some choose to wear a small head covering, or maintain a beard to follow the example of Prophet Muhammad. Muslim women often choose to wear loose-fitting and non-revealing clothing in public. Additionally, some choose to wear a hijab or other head covering and some may wear a face veil, commonly referred to as a niqab. Some individuals may choose to cover their body at all times, even in same-gender locker rooms.

Schools should help students maintain their personal interpretation of modesty by:

- Ensuring that students are not mocked or teased for their clothing choices.
- Allowing alternative clothing for physical education.
- Allowing private dressing and shower areas upon request.
- Being sensitive to the fact that female students who choose to wear the hijab commonly experience issues with other students, with one in three reporting having their hijab tugged, pulled, or otherwise offensively touched, and creating an environment where such conduct is unquestionably unacceptable.



Physical Education

- Discuss clothing requirement with Muslim parents.
- Reschedule classes for students preferring same gender exercise environment.
- Provide students with alternate activities if they cannot participate.

Gender Relations

- Do not extend hand first for handshakes with members of different genders.
- Avoid touching when comforting students and parents of different genders.
- Respect students' boundaries and allow them to choose whether they wish to hug or hold hands with members of different genders.

Adolescence and Gender Relations:

Puberty is a major life turning point for all students. Islam seeks to maintain modesty through offering guidance on what is acceptable for members of the opposite sex after puberty. Islamic guidelines suggest that physical contact and being alone together should be discouraged between unmarried males and females. Educators should not be offended if a Muslim student is reluctant to shake hands or avoids eye contact with members of the opposite sex. Further, Muslim students should not be forced to participate in certain coed activities such as physical education or school dances.

Schools should ensure Muslim students can maintain gender relations they are comfortable with by ensuring that students are not penalized or deemed disrespectful for maintaining a distance from members of the opposite sex, including allowing students alternatives to coed activities.



Religious Celebrations:

There are several days in the Muslim calendar with special religious significance, but the major celebrations are the two Eid days. The first Eid day, Eid al-Fitr, is celebrated on the day after the month of Ramadan. The second Eid day,

Eid al-Adha, is celebrated on the tenth day of the twelfth Islamic month during the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). Typical festivities include congregational prayer, gatherings with family and friends, and gifts and entertainment, especially for children. Schools with a significant number of Muslim students should consider giving Eid similar recognition as that given to Christmas and Hanukkah.

School should not penalize students for choosing to refrain from participating in school functions or social gatherings that celebrate religious holidays of other faiths.

Schools should accommodate these celebrations by:

- Ensuring students are not penalized for missing school to celebrate these holidays.
- Placing these holidays on school calendars so students and teachers are aware.
- Avoiding scheduling major events on these days.



Curriculum Issues:

Although availability of accurate and balanced instructional material is increasing, the continued use of outdated material in social studies and world history classes reinforces perceptions of Islam as a foreign creed and Muslims as enemies. Such divisiveness can contribute to incidents of anti-Muslim bullying, harassment, and violence.

- Schools should have their materials reviewed for bias by qualified Muslim educators. A list of organizations offering assistance developing curriculum can be found in the Resources Section.
- Educators should consider bringing in a Muslim speaker to teach about Islam in order to ensure the lesson is well-informed.
- Encourage class discussion that embraces diversity, tolerance, and an inclusive classroom environment.

Family Life/Sex Education:

Islam puts great emphasis on modesty, chastity, and morality, and there is a specific set of teachings with regard to human development and related issues. Schools **should** notify parents of these lessons, allow parents to review the course materials in advance, and honor parents' written request should they choose to opt out for their child.



Family Life/Sex Education Program

- Allow parents reasonable time to review any material pertaining to/with respect to sex education.
- Allow children to opt-out from all or part of the family life program.

Pledge of Allegiance:

While Islam prescribes respect for country and local laws, it also discourages acts of reverence to anyone or anything but God. Some Muslims may choose to opt out of reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. This should not be interpreted as a sign of disrespect, or lack of patriotism. Educators should respect the decision of Muslim and other students not to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, in accordance with their First Amendment rights.

Resources

Council on American-Islamic Relations, Philadelphia (CAIR-Philadelphia)- <https://pa.cair.com>

The Council on American-Islamic Relations, Philadelphia (CAIR-Philadelphia), is a chapter of the nation's largest American Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization. CAIR-Philadelphia's mission is to enhance understanding of Islam, protect civil rights, promote justice, and empower American Muslims.

Together with its Pittsburgh affiliate, CAIR-Philadelphia serves Pennsylvania's estimated five-hundred thousand American Muslims by providing direct legal services to victims of discrimination, working with media, facilitating community education, and engaging in policy advocacy to advance civic engagement.

- CAIR-Philadelphia provides direct legal services to individuals who have been the target of anti-Muslim harassment or bullying at school. CAIR-Philadelphia also provides Know Your Rights materials to students, including school presentations, to ensure that instances of bullying are addressed and thereby reduced.

Pennsylvania Department of Education, <https://education.pa.gov/>

- The state's website provides many useful resources to educators, including guidelines on complying with state laws and maintaining a safe school and healthy school environment.
 - Safe schools; bullying prevention; equity and inclusion:
<https://www.education.pa.gov/Schools/safeschools/bullying/Pages/default.aspx>

Endnotes

¹ Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), *The American Mosque 2011: Basic Characteristics of the American Mosque Attitudes of Mosque Leaders* (2011), <https://www.cair.com/images/pdf/The-American-Mosque-2011-part-1.pdf>.

² Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), *Targeted: 2018 Civil Rights Report* (2018), http://www.islamophobia.org/images/Targeted_2018_Civil_Rights_Report.pdf

³ “U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream”, Pew Research Center (July 26, 2017), <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/findings-from-pew-research-centers-2017-survey-of-us-muslims/>.

⁴ Council on American-Islamic Relations - California (CAIR-CA), *Unshakable: The Bullying of Muslim Students and the Unwavering Movement to Eradicate It* (2017), https://ca.cair.com/downloads/2017_CAIR-CA_School_Bullying_Report.pdf.

⁵ *Id.* at 15.

⁶ “Common Misconceptions about Muslims”, *Encountering the World of Islam*, <https://encounteringislam.org/misconceptions#1>.

⁷ Laura Mahalingappa, Terri Rodriguez & Nihat Polat, *Supporting Muslim Students: A Guide to Understanding the Diverse Issues of Today’s Classrooms* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

⁸ Toni Johnson, “Muslims in the United States”, Council on Foreign Relations (Sept. 19, 2011), <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/muslims-united-states>.

⁹ “Demographic portrait of Muslim Americans”, Pew Research Center (July 26, 2017), <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans/>.

¹⁰ See *supra* note 2, Chapter 7.

¹¹ Joanna Plucinska, “Study Says White Extremists Have Killed More Americans in the U.S. Than Jihadists Since 9/11”, *TIME* (June 25, 2015), <http://time.com/3934980/right-wing-extremists-white-terrorism-islamist-jihadi-dangerous/> (referencing research conducted by the New America Foundation); see also Ruiz-Grossman, “Most Of America’s Terrorists Are White, And Not Muslim”, *Huffington Post* (June 23, 2017), https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/domestic-terrorism-white-supremacists-islamist-extremists_us_594c46e4e4b0da2c731a84df (citing a report from The Nation Institute’s Investigative Fund and The Center for Investigative Reporting).

¹² CAIR-CA, *supra* note 4, at 6.

¹³ Deborah Lessne & Melissa Cidade, U.S. Dep’t of Just., Nat’l Ctr. for Educ. Stat., *Split-Half Administration of the 2015 School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey* (2015), <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017004.pdf>.

¹⁴ Org. for Sec. and Co-operation in Eur. [OSCE], *Guidelines for Educators on Countering Intolerance and Discrimination Against Muslims: Addressing Islamophobia through Education* 31-35 (2011), <http://www.osce.org/odihr/84495?download=true>.



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