



# Confronting Discrimination Based on Religion in Schools: *A Resource for Students and Families*

Religious discrimination can have devastating effects on students and their families. Students of all religious faiths and no faith have the right to access equal educational opportunities free from discrimination.

The Educational Opportunities Section of the Civil Rights Division at the U.S. Department of Justice enforces federal laws that protect students in public elementary and secondary schools, and public colleges and universities, from discrimination on the basis of religion, as well as race or national origin.<sup>1</sup> Public schools have a responsibility to take prompt and effective action when students face different treatment or harassment that creates a hostile environment on these bases.

<sup>1</sup> This fact sheet is primarily about religious discrimination in public schools, which is covered by Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a law enforced by the Department of Justice. Schools that receive federal financial assistance, including many private educational institutions, must also comply with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination based on race, color, or national origin (including shared ancestry and ethnic characteristics). The U.S. Department of Education, along with the Department of Justice and several other federal agencies, enforce Title VI with respect to their funding recipients.

**If you believe a student has been treated unfairly—for example, treated differently, harassed, bullied, or retaliated against—there are several actions you can take:**

1. Notify a school leader. File a formal complaint with the school, school district, college, or university. Keep records of any responses you receive.
2. Write down the details about what happened, including where and when the incident happened, and who was involved. Do this for each incident and keep copies of any related documents.
3. Ask the school to translate its documents into a language you understand and provide an interpreter if you need help speaking with school staff in a language other than English.
4. If the school does not address your complaint or the discrimination continues, consider filing a complaint with the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice at [civilrights.justice.gov](https://civilrights.justice.gov).



U.S. Department of Justice

# Civil Rights Division

[civilrights.justice.gov](https://civilrights.justice.gov)

*Depending on the specific facts and circumstances alleged in a complaint, the Civil Rights Division may investigate the following types of scenarios:*

- A small group of Muslim high school students gather daily in the corner of the cafeteria during the lunch period to pray. Classmates regularly disrupt the group's prayer—by walking through the rows of kneeling students, pouring water on the students, throwing food, or pulling the fire alarm. Students report the conduct to teachers who do nothing to investigate.
- A Jewish student wearing a kippah passes a group of students protesting Israel in the central quad on campus. Members of the group single out the student, call him “murderer” and “occupier,” follow him to class, and block his entry to the building. The student reports the incident to campus administrators who do nothing to investigate. Other Jewish students report being similarly targeted by the same group. As a result, some Jewish students avoid the quad, limiting their ability to visit the university’s main library.
- A Christian high school student takes a seat in the cafeteria during lunch. Before eating, she clasps her hands together and closes her eyes in silent prayer. A passing teacher taps the student on the shoulder and tells her she cannot pray in the cafeteria because of the separation between church and state. When the student complains to the school principal, the principal tells her she should pray in private to avoid offending non-Christian students.
- A medical school professor singles out a Jewish student during a lecture and demands she justify Israel’s treatment of Palestinians. The Professor later takes issue with the student’s choice to intern with a Jewish nursing home and refuses to grant course credit.
- A Sikh student transfers to a new middle school. When he arrives wearing a patka, a teacher tells him the dress code prohibits hats or head coverings and sends him to the principal’s office. He explains that wearing a patka is part of his Sikh faith, but the principal says that while she understands, allowing him to wear his patka would be unfair to other students. The school has let students wear hats in some situations, like baseball caps with the school logo on pep rally days.
- Students are photographed by a classmate at a campus-wide rally hosted by the Muslim Students Association (MSA) calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. Photos of MSA members who attended are posted online and around campus and tagged as “antisemitic Hamas-loving terrorists.” Contact information and family details are posted online. Other students use the photos and published information to harass students on campus and repeatedly call their homes. School administrators are made aware of the photos and phone calls but refuse to investigate or take any action to protect the students from further harassment at school.

The Civil Rights Division is prepared to field civil rights complaints from individuals who are not proficient in English. For more information, visit [justice.gov/crt/availability-language-assistance-services](https://justice.gov/crt/availability-language-assistance-services).