

U.S. education officials to gather info on discrimination against Muslims

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.14.16

Word Count **798**



Hannah Shraim (center) turns to chat with other students before an after-hours study session for their math final at Northwest High School in Germantown, Maryland, May 10, 2016. Photo: AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin

The U.S. Education Department has announced it will begin collecting information on something many students in America have to deal with. They are discriminated against and bullied based on their religion. This move by the Education Department is bringing new attention to what educators and advocates call a growing problem in public schools, particularly for Muslim students.

Catherine E. Lhamon is the department's assistant secretary for civil rights. She said the department plans to work with schools and communities to promote school environments where everyone feels included.

"Students of all religions should feel safe, welcome and valued in our nation's schools," she said in an announcement.

The news was welcomed by Muslim leaders. There have been terrorist attacks in Paris; San Bernardino, California; and Orlando, Florida by individuals who claimed allegiance to the Islamic State. The Islamic State is a terrorist group which controls large parts of Syria and Iraq. There is also a presidential candidate who has proposed a ban on all Muslims entering the country. These things have fueled a wave of anti-Muslim sentiment.

Hateful Messages Seep Into Schools

Frightening headlines and dishonest but persuasive language on the campaign trail are seeping into school lunchrooms and hallways. The effects of these words are being felt by Muslim children, advocates said.

"Everything from being called 'terrorist' to jokes about 'Where is your bomb?' Obviously, they are not really jokes," said Ibrahim Hooper, a spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations, or CAIR.

"It is creating a kind of toxic learning environment in which these students feel like they are under attack because of their faith," he said.

On December 31, departing U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan and current U.S. Education Secretary John B. King Jr. sent a joint letter to school leaders across the country. They asked for the school leaders' help to protect students from discrimination and harassment based on their race or national origin and religion.

A Need For Safe Spaces

Historic levels of refugees are fleeing violence in Syria. The letter said that this and other international and domestic events are creating "an urgent need for safe spaces for students."

It said certain students are "especially at risk of harassment." Those are students "who are, or are perceived to be, Syrian, Muslim, Middle Eastern, or Arab." It said that students who are Sikh, Jewish, or students of color are at risk as well.

The letter said educators have a chance to make a "real difference" in the way communities respond to these events. It encouraged them to help "students grapple with current events and conflicting viewpoints in constructive ways." Not, it said, in ways that "result in the targeting of particular students for harassment or blame."

The department's Office of Civil Rights enforces Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. This act prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color and national origin in programs receiving federal funding. Discrimination based on religion is also prohibited when it is related to someone's actual or perceived shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics.

Seeking A Better Understanding

Last year the office received more than 10,000 complaints of claims of discrimination. Some of these were related to religion. Those cases were typically not reported separately, as they will be in the future.

In districts found to have hostile environments, federal officials helped to improve harassment policies, training and surveys about the quality of school life.

A better understanding of how widespread religious discrimination is will help lawmakers and educators understand the depth of the problem. This will protect more students, educators say.

In a 2014 survey, more than half (55 percent) of American Muslim students said they were bullied at school because of their religion. The study was conducted by the California chapter of CAIR.

What One Young Girl Felt

Zahra is a 17-year-old college freshman at Montgomery College, who only gave her first name because of fear of anti-Muslim sentiment. She recalled what it felt like when she was a new immigrant to the United States, starting middle school outside of Dallas.

She recalled that she or family members were called names. In the seventh grade, she started wearing the hijab, a head covering worn in public by some Muslim women. One girl that she considered a friend stopped talking to her at school. Her school bus driver called her a "terrorist." For a while she stopped wearing it.

"I wanted to not go to school. I would rather be home-schooled," she said. "It was terrible for me."

As she got older, she said, teasing or insults bothered her less. And when she decided to wear the hijab, she did it because she felt proud to wear it.

Now she wants to educate people about Islam.

"People are ignorant, that is why they are fearful," she said.

Quiz

- 1 Which statement would be BEST to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) There have been terrorist attacks in different parts of the world.
 - (B) Ibrahim Hooper is the spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations.
 - (C) Discrimination and bullying are growing problems in public schools.
 - (D) Zahra wanted to be home-schooled because she was bullied at school.
- 2 Which two of the following sentences from the article include central ideas of the article?
- 1. *This move by the Education Department is bringing new attention to what educators and advocates call a growing problem in public schools, particularly for Muslim students.*
 - 2. *There have been terrorist attacks in Paris; San Bernardino, California; and Orlando, Florida by individuals who claimed allegiance to the Islamic State.*
 - 3. *The department's Office of Civil Rights enforces Title VI of the Civil Rights Act.*
 - 4. *A better understanding of how widespread religious discrimination is will help lawmakers and educators understand the depth of the problem.*
- (A) 1 and 2
 - (B) 1 and 3
 - (C) 1 and 4
 - (D) 3 and 4
- 3 According to the section "Hateful Messages Seep Into Schools," U.S. Education Secretary John B. King Jr. would be MOST likely to agree with which of the following statements?
- (A) The government and school leaders should work together to protect students from bullying.
 - (B) New laws from the government are needed to protect students from bullying.
 - (C) The students who have bullied other students because of their religion should be suspended from school.
 - (D) Teachers should not talk about terror attacks in schools because it might make some people uncomfortable.

4 What does Zahra say is the MAIN reason that some have anti-Muslim sentiment?

- (A) They don't want Muslim students to go to school.
- (B) They like being bullies and enjoy being rude to others.
- (C) They don't think the hijab should be worn to school.
- (D) They do not know enough about Islam.

Answer Key

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