

# Taking Responsibility for Anti-Muslim Discrimination in our Schools

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Amir is in fifth grade. Today is the day of his family history report, which he must give in front of the rest of his class at Skyline Elementary in Daly City, California. He's nervous because his family is from Iraq, and some of his family has the last name Hussein. Once he finishes his report, he asks if anyone has questions. Amir's teacher asks him if his family in Iraq supports the war. Amir doesn't know, his family has been here for many years and he doesn't even know any of his family that's in Iraq. The teacher asks, "So you don't know if they are terrorists?" Amir shakes his head.

In Minnesota, a Muslim girl who wears the traditional Islamic head-scarf, or hijab (*hee-job*), is repeatedly taunted by a schoolmate, called "terrorist", told to "go back to your country" and "the Qur'an is full of lies." She tells her school counselor, but no action is taken.

A guest has been invited to speak to Mr. Escamilla's social studies class at Enloe High School in North Carolina. Kamil Solomon, the head of a group dedicated to "helping Christians share Jesus with Muslims," proselytizes to the class and distributes pamphlets describing the prophet Muhammad as a "criminal" and "demon-possessed." The Enloe High School social studies department chair writes to thank Mr. Solomon, "It is our responsibility as educators to give our students the tools by which to evaluate, question and research issues they may encounter."

From name-calling, harassment, bullying and teasing, to assault and beatings, anti-Muslim hate crimes in schools have been steadily on the rise over the past ten years. The number of civil rights complaints received by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) rose 25.1% from 2005 to 2006. This marks the third straight year in which the number of civil rights complaints to CAIR reached a new high. The 2006 figures also represent the highest number of complaints since 9/11. Similarly, anti-Muslim hate crimes have risen 9.2% in 2006.

In 2006, 7% of anti-Muslim civil rights cases began with incidents in schools. These incidents occur between students, but many, as the examples cited earlier show, are initiated by teachers and school systems. Often anti-Muslim incidents are triggered by the victim's perceived ethnicity or religion (52%), Muslim-sounding name (21%), and the wearing of hijab (6%).

Given the frequency of instances of discrimination at the hands of teachers and students, what is our responsibility to students who are Muslim, or who are perceived to be Muslim? How can we gain understanding and compassion for what these children are going through, not just at school but in this society? What support can we give them? And how can we pursue adult and student learning in an effort to eliminate these biases and support our mission for social and educational equity?

To begin to understand and gain compassion for Muslim and Arab students, we have to look at ourselves in the mirror to reflect on our own beliefs and practices. As a nation, we generally do not know very much about Islam, Muslims, or Middle-Eastern cultures. In CAIR's 2006 American Public Opinion poll about Islam and Muslims, only 2% responded

that they considered themselves "very knowledgeable" about Islam and Muslims, and 39% considered themselves "somewhat knowledgeable." Additionally, only 20% had Muslim friends, and only 13% had Muslim colleagues. Only one-fourth considered themselves to be tolerant and accepting of Muslims.

For many Americans, our primary exposure to Islam and Muslims is through the media. However, according to a study conducted by California State University at San Bernardino "the American media has been a primary agent responsible for creating racist stereotypes, images and viewpoints of Arab Muslims before and after September 11, 2001." This media exposure, for the majority of Americans, is the number one information source about nearly one-third of the world's population.

Bringing perspective into the classroom about Islam, Muslims, terrorism and the war is crucial. As part of NSRF's mission to "foster social and educational equity," it's our responsibility to further educate ourselves, and to provide unbiased information to students and teachers alike, whether or not Muslim or Arab students are a part of our schools or classrooms. See the sidebar on page 23 for adult reading suggestions.

Given the wide variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds of Muslims, each individual's customs and practices will vary. (Only 15% of all Arabs are Muslim; the countries with the largest Muslim

*(continued on page 23)*



population are Indonesia and India.) Students who dress or appear as Muslims may struggle with teasing or threats from peers or even teachers. However, many Muslims do not dress in an obvious way, and their inner struggles are just as painful. Consider some of these questions to help identify how you can best support Muslims in your classroom.

- Are they afraid to come to school?
- Are they scared to practice their religion in school (via dress, prayer, reading scripture, etc.)? What accommodation can you offer?
- Do they have family or friends who are affected by war?
- Are they suffering from fatigue, depression or lack of sleep with international family?
- Are they interested in discussion about current events, religion, or culture, or do they prefer to avoid attention?
- Are they scared that their perceived connection to current events, or their opinions about current events, will be held against them by teachers or principals?
- Have they been threatened or assaulted by fellow students or teachers?
- Are there students in the classroom who have expressed biased opinions or made negative remarks? How can you support those students' learning and growth?

Even if there are no Muslim students in your class or school, I urge you to consider ways you can introduce new ideas and perspectives into the classroom, like having a guest speaker, such as a Muslim teacher or a representative from a local mosque or Islamic school.

Finally, I'd like to share my personal connection to this concern. Two years ago, while I was working at the Winter Meeting in Denver, Colorado, I received a phone call from my husband, who was distraught. Our mosque had been the target of an early-morning bombing attempt, which thankfully only caused minor damage and hurt no one. The bomber was by all definitions a terrorist, as the act was designed to bring fear to our community. And it was frightening- the bomber left a burned Qur'an behind.

Many positive things came out of this incident. Other religious communities rallied to our side to stand against hate in our town, and our relationships with those groups were further strengthened. However, when my husband was interviewed several times on local radio about the incident as a represen-

## Resources

- Islamicity: [www.islamicity.com/education](http://www.islamicity.com/education)
- *Understanding Islam and the Muslims: The Muslim Family and World Peace*, by TJ Winter and John Williams
- *The Vision of Islam: Visions of Reality, Understanding Religions*, by Sachiko Murata and William Chittick
- *What Islam Did For Us: Understanding Islam's Contribution to Western Civilization*, by Tim Wallace-Murphy
- *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity*, by Seyyed Hossein Nasr
- *Silent No More: Confronting America's False Images of Islam*, by Paul Findley (former Congressman, D-IL, 1961-1983)
- *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, by Omid Safi
- *Why I Am a Muslim* by Asma Gull Hasan
- Council on American Islamic Relations: [www.cair.org](http://www.cair.org)

tative of the mosque, a troubling number of callers couldn't accept what happened; instead, they suggested that someone at the mosque had done this deliberately as a sympathy ploy, or that we "had it coming" for all of the terrorism in the Muslim world. This practice of blaming the victim is all too common and parallels the tactics used regularly against people of color when they raise questions or criticism about racism.

We cannot afford to be silent about anti-Muslim bias in the thinking or the practices of our schools and communities.

*"If the 21st century wishes to free itself from the cycle of violence, acts of terror and war, and avoid repetition of the experience of the 20th century - that most disaster-ridden century of humankind, there is no other way except by understanding and putting into practice every human right for all mankind, irrespective of race, gender, faith, nationality or social status."* -Shirin Ebadi, Nobel Peace Prize Winner and first Muslim woman recipient, 2003

I invite you all to join me in this conversation, and hope you will feel free to contact me if you have any questions or thoughts on this subject. ■

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