



# **BIAS AND BULLYING IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS:**

## **Mitigating the Impact on Muslim and Perceived-as-Muslim Students**

America Indivisible

Council on American-Islamic Relations

The Freedom Forum Institute's Religious Freedom Center

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the current political moment, marked by open hostility against Muslims and Islam, Muslim students in public schools face twice the rates of bullying as compared to their peers, according to current research.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, those perceived as Muslim, such as Sikh students who wear turbans or other visible signs of their religious identity, suffer from bullying at even higher rates.<sup>2</sup> Recognizing bullying as a symptom of the broader problem of school climate, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), America Indivisible, and the Religious Freedom Center convened national experts and practitioners at a one-day symposium on “Bullying and Bias” in August 2019 to explore the current “state of the field” and best practices to address the complex issue of religious-identity based bullying. Understanding the problem of bullying as a multifaceted issue, the symposium was organized around the following four themes: 1) Peer-to-peer aggression or bullying, 2) Cultural and religious literacy for school officials, 3) Curricular reform and instructional training, and 4) Political pushback.

The meeting provided a learning exchange and capacity building opportunity for practitioners and scholars. This paper summarizes the key themes and findings that emerged in the symposium and identifies proposed actions to help advance the national conversation. Resulting recommendations include:

- Empower Youth – Student involvement in anti-bullying measures is critical. They must be included in decision-making and problem-solving spaces and be a central part of conversations around student experiences and consequences for harmful behavior.
- Learn to Listen – Teachers should be equipped to facilitate student conversations on identity development through training in social and emotional learning.
- Bring the Experts – Incorporate current scholarship in the classroom. Schools should invite academically certified content specialists to conduct workshops, develop curriculum in conjunction with teachers, and offer age-appropriate resources for classroom use.
- Incentivize – School districts must incentivize workshops and professional development sessions for educators and administrators around the experiences of minority students, subject-matter experts, and classroom conversations around controversial topics to encourage a culture of inclusion and preparedness.
- Build Relationships – Community stakeholders and teachers should build relationships with school board members, superintendents, curriculum supervisors, and diversity specialists to develop organic and potential response networks that can anticipate and address incidents.
- Use Existing Structures – Schools should use existing structures of community outreach, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programming, and student leadership programming to develop proactive strategies to anticipate and mitigate problems surrounding bias and bullying.
- Mitigate, Don’t Instigate – When bias incidents reach public attention and cause controversy, school officials and community members should act swiftly to deescalate tensions and avoid social media and formal media engagement until absolutely necessary. Likewise, it should be understood that families, community advocacy groups and school officials have distinct and complementary roles, that should be used wisely to help mitigate problems in the interest of building long-term and lasting solutions.

<sup>1</sup> *SINGLED OUT: Islamophobia in the Classroom and the Impact of Discrimination on Muslim Students*. Council on American-Islamic Relations-California, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> *‘Go Home, Terrorist’: A Report on the Bullying of Sikh American School Children*. Sikh Coalition, 2014.

## INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that anti-Muslim bigotry, bias, and Islamophobia have become prominent features of the national landscape in media, politics, and culture. Anti-Muslim bigotry, however, not only impacts Muslim communities, but builds upon and adds to a long legacy of anti-immigrant sentiment and anti-black racism. While there are a number of efforts underway across the country to limit the influence of racialized Islamophobia in society and politics, the national conversation often overlooks the impact of anti-Muslim racism on bigotry in public school settings.

Indeed, preliminary research has shown that Muslims face bullying at twice the rate of the national average and most children report that they do not feel safe approaching their teachers or school administrators about the issue.<sup>3</sup> Another troubling dynamic is that school administrators and teachers are often under-resourced to address this complex challenge, whether in terms of mitigating conflict or simply possessing the cultural literacy tools to manage shortcomings in curriculum, extracurricular activities, and interpersonal communication.

In order to explore the current state of the field on the complex problem of Islamophobia in public schools, a steering committee composed of CAIR's Department of Research and Advocacy, America Indivisible, and the Religious Freedom Center hosted a closed-door symposium with stakeholders and national experts in civil society advocacy, public school administration, and academic research in August 2019.

Recognizing bullying as a symptom of a multifaceted problem, the steering committee approached the issue through the following four areas:

1. The state of peer-to-peer aggression and bullying; identifying shortcomings and obstacles

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<sup>3</sup> *SINGLED OUT: Islamophobia in the Classroom and the Impact of Discrimination on Muslim Students*. Council on American-Islamic Relations-California, 2019; Nadia S. Ansary, *Religious-*

in contemporary approaches to managing the problem.

2. Educator and administrator cultural literacy and responsiveness vis-a-vis religious and identity-based bias and bullying.
3. Curriculum and lesson plans on and around culturally and politically sensitive topics.
4. Public schools as the site of culture-wars; addressing the politics of school engagement.

The committee chose these vectors after preliminary consultation with experts and stakeholders who consistently confirm the interconnected and overlapping nature of these subject areas. That is, for example, the fact that anti-Muslim bullying may often go unnoticed or unresolved due to a lack of teacher or administrator awareness on what constitutes Islamophobic behavior or activity. Furthermore, inaccurate or low-quality curriculum materials may exacerbate anti-Muslim and Islamophobic ideas and lead to student alienation and targeting. In order to ensure that public school environments and stakeholders approach the issue of direct or latent anti-Muslim bias in a holistic fashion, the steering committee sought feedback from stakeholders on these areas simultaneously.

This white paper provides a summary of the symposium proceedings and is also informed by current research conducted by experts and advocacy organizations. Key themes and findings that emerged from the discussion are summarized in the following conclusions.

1. Participants agreed that in order to address bullying and bias, schools need to integrate programming across multiple administrative columns such as curriculum, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), school safety, and community engagement. This can best be accomplished by convening a stakeholder task-force composed of

*Based Bullying: Insights on Research and Evidence-Based Best Practices from the National Interfaith Anti-Bullying Summit*. Institute for Social Policy and Understanding and American Muslim Health Professionals, 2018.

- community members, administrators, students, and teachers.
2. Student-led support networks provide the most impactful and sustainable resources necessary to address the issue of identity-based bullying and bias. Therefore, students should be incorporated into all dimensions of program development by community members and school administrators.
  3. Addressing religious and identity-based bullying and bias can and should build upon pre-existing DEI infrastructures that address issues around racism, socio-economic inequality, and prejudice.
  4. The problems of racialized Islamophobia and identity-based bullying are challenging and constantly evolving subjects influenced by the social and political climate of society at large. Consequently, administrators should aim to develop skills-based pedagogical techniques and adaptive cultural responsiveness capacities, rather than attempt to solve the problem exclusively through “one-off” diversity trainings and fixed competency standards.

*“Preliminary research has shown that Muslims face bullying at twice the rate of the national average and most children report that they do not feel safe approaching their teachers or school administrators about the issue.”*

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## **I. GAPS IN EXISTING ANTI-BULLYING CAMPAIGNS**

Educational institutions possess the power to transform students’ lives. Unfortunately, this is not always a positive transformation, as public schools are also often plagued by peer-to-peer and administrator-to-student bias and bullying. Multiple studies in the past five years have shown that Muslim students face bullying at twice the rate of the national average. Students of color and other religious backgrounds are also targets of identity-based bullying.

The term “bullying” is widely accepted and used to refer to unwanted, aggressive behavior among or toward school-aged children. However, participants in the focus group agreed that the term reduces the degree of harm inflicted on targeted students. One participant suggested that the term “social violence” is more accurate and better able to capture the institutional and individual peer-to-peer and educator-to-student bias and harassment in schools. Participants also agreed that general bullying policies in schools are frequently vague, unhelpful, and unsuitable for addressing bias incidents, acts of aggression, and improving school climate, especially for those from marginalized communities. One student participant noted the futile but common practice of providing students with handbooks on bullying to read and sign at the beginning of the year as a means of addressing the issue, commenting, “students treated it as a joke.” Another participant raised the point that the immense social stigma associated with reporting bullying to school officials lead many students to remain silent and feel disempowered in the face of abuse and harassment.

In identifying best practices, all participants agreed that the most effective anti-bullying campaigns adopted the responsible use of restorative justice models when dealing with cases of bullying. The Department of Education defines restorative justice practices (RJP) as “a set of informal and formal strategies intended to build relationships and a sense

of community to prevent conflict and wrongdoing, and respond to wrongdoings, with the intention to repair any harm that was a result of the wrongdoing.”<sup>4</sup>

RJP, advocates argue, allows for community-wide engagement on the problem and diffuses wider tension by moving away from the language of victim vs bully. As one participant noted students who bully are also victims in other ways. RJP also protects those subjected to bullying by rushing to conventional conflict resolution programs that place the bully in a “square-off” position with the targeted student. One participant noted that it was more useful to create an opportunity for the bully to express the harm they created, rather than putting the bully and the bullied face to face. Participants agreed that having the targeted student and the bully first talk about their experiences, instead of immediately enacting disciplinary consequences, helped to foster an understanding of where bias comes from and prevented further polarization.

Another practice that participants strongly suggested was incorporating student voices into the decision-making processes to develop both preventative and reactive measures to bullying. They noted the value of teachers facilitating student-led engagement to allow for “free discourse among students to bring up controversial topics.” One powerful example of this is an interfaith initiative started by students in Maryland. The students write down the words that they call each other and have concluded that they do not know what many of the words mean. This has led to conversations in which students talk about their faiths and cultures with their peers. Another example of incorporating student voice includes youth teaching educators about their communities. For example, members of Sikh Kid to Kid (SK2K), a youth-based organization that seeks to eradicate ignorance with the power of education, have taught a primer on Sikhism to their teachers in Montgomery County Public Schools for years, incorporating their

individual experiences and stories. Participants noted that when youth are involved in the work, it speaks to people’s hearts and more people listen.

Participants also raised the common practice of educating students to be upstanders rather than bystanders. It was quickly noted however that doing so may result in unwanted consequences– namely that celebrating “upstanders” could be seen as an artificial solution that results in blowback against and alienation of students who were upstanders. Likewise, it was often the case that the most impacted and vulnerable students were also the least likely to benefit from or participate in such initiatives. In response, participants offered that the entire school climate needed to be one of upstanders, rather than for it to be an individualized phenomenon. Developing such a climate, participants agreed, depends upon strong student leadership.

Finally, participants noted that the exclusive focus on youth and children as the target of bullying prevention programming was another major shortcoming in bullying prevention programming. That is, because teachers and school staff model behavior for children it is critically important that they too become trained in social and emotional learning (SEL) practices that influence students’ development. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning considers SEL to be central to the success of a school:

The environment for learning has become particularly important to educators at a time when young people are experiencing unusual degrees of stress throughout our society. Children and adolescents take their cues from adults. As adults, we set the tone for what is acceptable in our society, and this

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<sup>4</sup> “Restorative Justice Practices and Bullying Prevention,” Stop Bullying, 2016.

<https://www.stopbullying.gov/blog/2016/03/02/restorative-justice-practices-and-bullying-prevention.html>.

contributes in powerful ways to the social norms of our schools' culture.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, a majority of participants including the youth in the focus group stressed the need for many educators to be trained in these systems, noting that student alienation often resulted from the hidden or explicit bias-based behaviors of teachers and staff.

Given the challenges associated with addressing bullying among or toward school-aged children, participants made the following recommendations.

- Empower youth – student involvement in anti-bullying measures is critical and must be included in decision-making and problem-solving spaces. Participants recommended that students be a central part of conversations around student experiences and consequences for harmful behavior. This was also tied to the larger conversation around school climate, which is further discussed under the “School Administration” section of this paper.
- Adopt restorative justice practices (RJP) as a way to work through conflict resolution at all levels. This can lead to long-term positive results on school climate. That is, RJP should be used not just for bullying or discipline, but as a means to think through working out routine conflicts including those that occur between staff, parents, administrators, and children.
- Adopt teacher training on social and emotional learning – students experience a period of psychological development in which they work to define who they are, while also seeking to be empowered. Teachers should be equipped to create a safe space for and facilitate these types of conversations through training on social and emotional learning. This helps to create a positive school climate and thereby challenge bullying.

## II. SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

Inside and outside of the classroom, school administrators and teachers act as guides, role models, and leaders for students, and set the tone for school norms and learning environments. Given this central role of school administration, participants unanimously agreed that schools must adopt the attitude and framework of “cultural responsiveness” to discuss DEI efforts and programs, rather than use the language of “cultural competency,” “proficiency,” or “literacy.” Whereas the latter suggests an end or arrival point, the former calls for continuous and dynamic engagement of constant learning. The Teaching Diverse Learners resource center at Brown University, describes Cultural Responsiveness in the following way:

Culture is central to learning. It plays a role not only in communicating and receiving information, but also in shaping the thinking process of groups and individuals. A pedagogy that acknowledges, responds to, and celebrates fundamental cultures offers full, equitable access to education for students from all cultures.

The culturally responsive framework also encompasses the idea that teachers and administrators must be responsive to students' particular needs, and a concerted effort must be tailored to meet the ever-growing challenge of a shifting cultural landscape. Put simply, a “one-size-fits-all” approach is unhelpful and ineffective.

Participants also agreed that building a school culture and climate that embraces what it means to honor and respect one another is critical, as is grounding the work “in a sense of belonging” for the students. As one participant commented, “this is ‘heart’ work as much as it is hard work.” Participants concurred on the need for both a top-down and ground-up approach as another framework to build an inclusive and respectful school climate. On one

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<sup>5</sup> “Creating a Safe Environment for Learning” CASEL, <https://casel.org/creating-a-safe-environment-for-learning/>.

hand, participants agreed that it is important to obtain high-level administrative (school board and superintendent) buy-in on sensitive topics. It is key for adults to build and operate the system that will drive the culture and climate of the school. On the other hand, it is critical for teachers to facilitate student-led engagement and allow for open conversation among students to raise controversial topics. One participant synthesized this sentiment well, stating, “You have to take time to build a safe space in the room before you cover heavy or sensitive content.” Another participant added, “We have to get to the point where talking about Islam or slavery isn’t controversial.” Participants also noted that, given the nature of the top-down and bottom-up approach as collaborative, it was essential to develop a truly grassroots equity policy in coordination with the community – faith leaders, parents, students, and staff – for maximum buy-in.

Given that traditional DEI initiatives cover issues surrounding race, ethnicity, and multicultural history, it might be assumed that adding the subjects of religion and religious identity to such programming would be a common-sense and unremarkable event. Unfortunately, in the current political climate marked by widespread Islamophobia in the public sphere, the typically straightforward act of teaching about Islam as well as Muslim cultures and practices has become a site of national controversy and legal contention. A trend has emerged across the country of parents refusing to allow their children to participate in classroom assignments and lectures about Islamic beliefs and practices. Parents use the standard practice of “opting out” for such requests, although

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<sup>6</sup> The Thomas More Law Center is a national right-wing law firm that boasts of its use of litigation as a tool to discriminate against Muslims and Islam in America and claims to be engaged in a “battle” against the “threat”; ACT for America is a national political organization that positions itself as the nation’s largest grassroots national security organization. It is the largest anti-Muslim group in the country and engages in political lobbying to pass anti-Muslim/anti-Sharia laws, aligns themselves with right-wing politicians and anti-Muslim leaders, and organizes anti-Muslim demonstrations and protests. ACT is classified as a hate group by the Council on American-Islamic Relations and by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

“opt out” usage has typically been very limited across the country and normally reserved for sex education. Backed by powerful special interest groups and far-right advocacy networks such as the Thomas More Law Center and ACT for America, parents have sued school districts across the country, arguing that such teaching amounts to a form of religious indoctrination and violates the First Amendment.<sup>6</sup>

One such case in Maryland, (*Caleigh Wood, v. Evelyn Arnold, et al.*) in which a student refused to complete an assignment about Islam, was appealed all the way to and rejected by the Supreme Court in 2019.<sup>7</sup> In another case, a set of plaintiffs sued the San Diego Unified School District in California for agreeing to formally engage the Council of American Islamic Relations to conduct a series of anti-Islamophobia training sessions. This case, and those similar to it, have either been settled without penalty or summarily dismissed on the grounds that they lack merit or even standing.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, the public fallout from these cases has created a chilling effect among school administrators who are rightfully wary of inadvertently triggering a highly visible controversy and often concede to parents’ demands, although they may not be warranted, or even legal. Participants agreed that this new, emerging dynamic was a substantial challenge and that most schools and districts have yet to develop solutions to address parent opposition to Islam related curriculum.

School administrators and officials familiar with the emerging problem of challenging instruction about Islam and Muslim culture in public schools

<sup>7</sup> “*Caleigh Wood, Petitioner v. Evelyn Arnold, Et Al.*” Supreme Court of the United States, n.d. <https://www.supremecourt.gov/Search.aspx?FileName=/docket/docketfiles/html/public/18-1438.html>; Jordan S. Rubin, “Islam in Public School Challenge Rejected by Supreme Court.” *Bloomberg Law*, October 15, 2019. <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/us-law-week/islam-in-public-school-challenge-rejected-by-supreme-court>.

<sup>8</sup> Rupa Shenoy. “San Diego School District and Parents Reach Settlement over Muslim Civil Rights Program.” *Public Radio International*, April 5, 2019. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-04-05/san-diego-school-district-and-parents-reach-settlement-over-muslim-civil-rights>



recommended that teachers and administrators ground themselves in the internationally accepted norms and practices of teaching about religion in secular contexts. One such resource was the report and toolkit, *The Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*, prepared by the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe in 2007. Some of the key guidelines of the Toledo report affirm that: 1) Knowledge about religions and beliefs can...foster democratic citizenship, promote understanding of societal diversity and, at the same time, enhance social cohesion; 2) Knowledge about religions and beliefs has the valuable potential of reducing conflicts that are based on lack of understanding for others' beliefs; 3) Teaching about religions and beliefs is most effective when combined with efforts to instill respect for the rights of others, even when there is disagreement about religions or beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

Participants all agreed that one of the best ways to fill shortcomings in a school's ability to address issues of religious identity and practice was simply to diversify the staff in a way that is representative of the local community. Likewise, schools can more deliberately integrate community stakeholders in programming and outreach. While these solutions can help create informal channels of communication and serve as "pressure valves" to help preempt and react to conflict, they should not be considered DEI solutions in and of themselves. In fact, participants were resolute that the burden of addressing systemic bias and discrimination in the school environment often fell on the shoulders of average teachers and staff that happened to be from ethnically and religiously diverse backgrounds. This often led to "burnout" and unwanted attention by teachers and staff of color. To provide lasting and sustainable solutions to the problem, participants suggested continued investment in building out the DEI infrastructure within schools as well as integrating

that infrastructure with other administrative columns such as school safety and curriculum.

In light of these points of consensus and concern, participants offered an array of best practices. Individuals highlighted the pivotal importance of year-round, sustained DEI programming that builds a school climate which embraces what it means to honor and value one another. Participants repeatedly emphasized the futility of programming limited to once or twice a year, as it does not sustain ongoing cultural responsiveness. One participant provided the example of a program in San Francisco in which specialists have developed a specific initiative to regularly engage with immigrant parents in order to reach the students they seek to help. Participants also suggested adding user-friendly and low stakes forms of engagement such as film screenings, reading groups, and brown-bag lunches as a means of sustaining dialogue with a broad set of stakeholders.

Participants also advocated for consistent and extensive teacher and administration trainings on developing cultural responsiveness practices and recognizing microaggressions and implicit biases. Such trainings are essential proactive measure to develop inclusive and respectful school climates, especially given that, as one participant said, "knowledge of religious accommodation is still lacking at an institutional level." It is often the case that teachers will train themselves as they go, using resources easily available online. Mandated and accredited teacher and administration trainings would serve a significant role in establishing inclusive and supportive schools.

To establish inclusive and supportive schools where students feel safe, comfortable, and valued, participants made the following recommendations:

- Center student voice – student voice is critical and they must be included in decision-making spaces around school administration.

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<sup>9</sup> "The Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools." The Office of Democratic

Institutions and Human Rights of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. 2007.  
<https://www.osce.org/odihr/29154?download=true>

Participants recommended that districts create permanent spots for students on school boards and allow students to facilitate and lead community forums around school concerns.

- Establish mandatory workshops and professional development sessions around the experiences of minority students, subject expertise, and facilitating classroom conversations around controversial topics.
- Push for inclusive, neutral, and integrated cultural curriculum that meets legal standards for instruction about religion in public schools.

*“Building a school culture and climate that embraces what it means to honor and respect one another is critical...As one participant commented, “this is ‘heart’ work as much as it is hard work.”*

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### III. CURRICULUM ENHANCEMENT

Educational materials, including textbooks and supplementary resources, constitute the main vehicle for informing students about the world around them. It is therefore not surprising that curriculum development and content standards are areas of contention in broader society. Although, ensuring that educational materials are accurate and fair is essential to developing civically engaged and culturally responsive youth, state standards and curriculum pertaining to Islam and Muslims have at times been found to be radically biased against Islam and Muslims. One participant provided the example of a world history standard that her colleague reviewed that directly tied violence to Islam. Numerous textbooks have also been found to contain incorrect and inaccurate information about Islamic practices and beliefs.

Another concern that emerged was the limited class time teachers have to allocate to the teaching of sensitive issues such as race, religion, and identity, which may lead teachers to essentialize or inadvertently inflame controversial issues. Participants also expressed concern about teachers obtaining information and classroom materials online through unvetted sources, which are often tainted by outright prejudice or implicit bias. State standards also present a challenge for teachers to tailor their lessons to mandated content areas while also facilitating civil discourse and critical thinking skills.

Given these challenges, participants mentioned a few best practices. One thing they agreed on was the importance of integrating top-down and bottom-up approaches to curriculum engagement, which involve superintendents, school boards, and curriculum specialists, along with teachers and students in the classroom. A top-down approach relates to how leadership perceives sensitive topics and addresses them. Given that the majority of teachers in history – the subject area under which many sensitive subjects such as religion and slavery are introduced – are

white, it is essential for administrators to provide resources and trainings that address educator bias and instruct educators on how to teach sensitive and controversial topics. With regards to the bottom-up aspect, participants agreed that when talking about controversial subjects, a greater emphasis needs to be placed on the manner in which educators approach the content and create an environment where thoughtful and engaged discussion and discourse can occur. If teachers set norms to account for a variety of perspectives from the start, when controversial topics do arise, classrooms can use civil discourse to respect each other, respect varying viewpoints, and think critically about subject matter. Facilitating these conversations may require social and emotional training, a point covered under the previous section on anti-bullying campaigns.

Participants also agreed upon the use of an integrated world history model, introduced by a content specialist, which organizes the teaching of history around world eras instead of civilizations. This holistic, humancentric model focuses on the interconnections between regions and people across the world. Rather than a multicultural model that fragments and isolates societies based on preconceived notions of what constitutes a “culture” or “civilization,” the integrated model helps students understand particular peoples and religious traditions not as homogeneous and separate “worlds” of historical reality, but as embedded in contexts of change across time and space that ultimately include all of humanity.<sup>10</sup> This model overcomes the zero-sum game of curriculum development that exists under a multicultural model, where teachers may have only two days to teach about Islam, for example. It thereby addresses the challenge educators face of a lack of adequate time to devote to a particular “culture” or “civilization.” Also, unlike the fragmented multicultural model, the holistic, integrated approach provides students a chance to understand the complexity of world development and to develop a

sense that all humans have participated in the advancement of humanity, not just a specific group.

Overall, participants recommended the following initiatives for stakeholders to undertake in order to improve curriculum in the classroom:

- Incorporate current scholarship in the classroom – Schools should invite university content specialists to come into schools to conduct workshops, develop curriculum in conjunction with teachers, and offer age-appropriate resources for classroom use.
- Make allies at the district administrative level – Community stakeholders and teachers should build relationships with school board members, superintendents, curriculum supervisors, and diversity specialists to facilitate a district-wide engagement in curricular reform.
- Use curricular resources that have buy-in from a variety of stakeholders, most importantly from impacted or represented communities. Teachers and curriculum specialists should listen to the concerns of represented communities and work with area experts to incorporate that feedback, as appropriate and possible, into robust, nuanced, and academically rigorous curricular materials.

**“The integrated world history model “overcomes the zero-sum game of curriculum development.”**

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<sup>10</sup> Susan L. Douglass and Ross E. Dunn. “Interpreting Islam in American Schools.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political*

*and Social Science* 588 (July 2003): 52–72.  
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446217467.n5>.

## IV. POLITICS AND PUSHBACK

Public education has long been a battleground for cultural and political debate in American society. In the current moment, this tendency has increased and made it nearly impossible to agree upon a set of values, information, and stories children should be exposed to in public school settings.<sup>11</sup> For administrators and teachers eager to expand their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programming by building capacity in the area of religious and cultural responsiveness, this problem is exacerbated by advocacy groups, families, and even politicians that want to contest the way schools approach this problem. In some cases, schools may be subject to frivolous lawsuits or targeted in aggressive public advocacy campaigns. However, even in calmer contexts, many school districts may be concerned about navigating the contours of the First Amendment when teaching about religion, making discussions about “religious literacy” difficult. Participants in the focus group agreed that schools are highly sensitive to political and public pressure and that stakeholders should proceed with caution and care in order to develop long-lasting relationships and solutions to the problem of bias and bullying in public schools.

Participants identified a number of best practices that already empower stakeholders and should be shared across platforms. Given the pressure districts face, stakeholders, especially advocacy organizations, should advance their work in broad, versatile coalitions and partnership models that are adaptive to the individual contexts of particular schools and districts. If seeking a change in a school policy or practice, advocates efforts should prioritize long-term relationship building and “behind-the-scenes” work over public pressure or social media campaigns. In one case, a local group’s public campaign for a school district to adopt a religious holiday was said to have increased tensions in the community. Not only

did the district not adopt the proposed policy change, but stakeholders felt more alienated from one another than they had before the campaign, thus deepening intercultural tension rather than relieving it. All participants recognized that long-term structural and systemic change was far more possible when carried out in private and professional settings that promote negotiation and creative collaboration, than in the public arena which often posits problems as a zero-sum game.

That said, participants also agreed that elected officials, administrators, and students must be held accountable when their views and statements, whether private or public, violate well-agreed upon norms of community engagement, tolerance, and respect. Moreover, if such views threaten the safety and learning environment of students, corrective action must be taken by the community as a whole. Participants confirmed that despite the difficulty faced by a community when an incident of actual or alleged bias or identity-based bullying takes place, stakeholders should leverage the attention generated by the problem to develop long-term sustained strategies to mitigate the underlying issues that may have originally led to the incident. In this way, the incident can be used as a positive force for change that enables the relationship and trust building mentioned earlier.

The most consistent feedback suggested developing proactive programs that would anticipate problems before they arise. That is, despite good faith efforts to foster culturally, racially, and religiously inclusive environments, stakeholders should be aware of potential problems that may emerge in their unique settings. In the words of one participant, “when there is an incident, it’s never isolated. It is the symptom that has simply shown its head.” Proactive programming included building upon internal, pre-existing structures to introduce and further dialogue and discussion on issues around identity-based bullying. For example, administrators might consider

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<sup>11</sup> Andrew Hartman. “How the Culture Wars Destroyed Public Education.” *The Washington Post*. September 5, 2017.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2017/09/05/how-the-culture-wars-destroyed-public-education/>.

using Parent Teacher Associations as sites to host regular reading groups that can review case studies and relevant literature to increase the community's capacity to respond and react to bias incidents or public fallout. Stakeholders should also make creative use of community spaces to host simple discussions, Q&A sessions, and other "light" forms of DEI outreach to ensure there are learning opportunities for community members who may be at different levels of learning and exposure to the subjects discussed here. All participants stressed the enormous breadth and depth of existing resources, alleviating the need to reinvent the wheel, and encouraged stakeholders to collaborate in structured and sustained ways for long-term impact.

Likewise, communities may consider hosting town hall forums to bring in various actors to discuss the problems of bias and bullying. These forums are most successful when led and convened by a broad coalition of stakeholders, which can help alleviate the political burden often placed on school officials in precarious positions. Moreover, impacted children should not only be given center stage in such platforms but also allowed to play a leading role in designing the program itself, thus ensuring buy-in at all levels of the community. In designing such activities, organizers should be careful not to exacerbate the "echo-chamber" effect that often emerges in these spaces, namely the tendency for the average participant in the space to already be invested in the conversation. To do so, stakeholders, especially those in positions of power, can and should reach out to the less vocal voices and actors in a given community to ensure their participation. Targeted outreach should also anticipate the so-called "spoilors," who may be less invested in the conversation or who are opposed to the proposed actions. Although it is unlikely that such outreach may result in a harmonious outcome, the precedent set by active and targeted engagement can build channels of communication that may help resolve tensions over the long-term.

Given the complexity of the conversation around this issue, participants made the following recommendations:

- Use existing structures – schools should use existing structures of community outreach, DEI programming, and student leadership programming to develop proactive strategies to anticipate and mitigate problems surrounding bias and bullying in school environments. These include, but are not limited to:
  - PTA-led reading circles and film screenings that provide opportunities for parents of all backgrounds to increase their cultural literacy and responsiveness
  - Student clubs that promote peer-to-peer learning and outreach
  - Public town-hall forums convened in partnership or led by community stakeholders
- Provide distinct and complementary roles for stakeholders – when bias incidents (whether actual or alleged) reach public attention, stakeholders have distinct roles they can play to help lighten the tension. These include but are not limited to:
  - School administrators and teachers should welcome transparency, visibility, and accountability, avoiding the appearance of defensiveness or non-engagement.
  - Community members should not exacerbate tensions by leveling unrealistic or inappropriate demands on school officials.
  - Students should be given platforms to provide input on the issue and help identify solutions.
  - All members of the community should use the opportunity to develop lasting relationships that can help solve problems over the long-term.

## PROPOSED PROJECTS AND ACTIVITIES

In lieu of a conclusion, the steering committee and symposium participants identified a number of potential collaborative projects and activities that can help stakeholders advance the conversation on racialized Islamophobia in public schools in local and national contexts. Stakeholders agreed that such activities should have the following criteria:

1. Be institutionally collaborative and involve stakeholder communities,
2. Be designed as recurring, rather than as one-time engagements,
3. Be resourced for medium and long-term sustainability, preferably by local community and corporate foundations,
4. Be designed and led by student and young adult leaders as much as possible.

The following projects were identified by symposium participants as within the scope, capacity, and mission of their existing institutional frameworks.

1. Continued Research: School administrators and advocates noted the need for greater and more nuanced statistical research on the existence and impact of religious identity-based bullying as it relates to Muslims and those perceived as such. Existing surveys are geographically and methodologically disparate, creating a jagged research landscape that slows down the potential for advocacy. Civil society organizations, university-based researchers, and public school administrators can coordinate to implement the survey.
2. Case Study Workshops and Scenario Planning: Stakeholders need dedicated time and resources to prepare for and react to incidents of religious and identity-based bias and bullying. Symposium participants suggested a series of scenario-planning workshops with cross-sector stakeholders designed to provide capacity building opportunities for stakeholders in civil society and school administration. The workshops, facilitated by DEI and university-based specialists, would prioritize experiential learning through role-playing and reflecting upon actual case studies.
3. Curriculum Development Training: Teachers and instructors are constantly in need of certified and reliable supplementary curriculum material. Although there are teams of specialists located at universities, the demand for such services far exceeds the existing supply and current models are prepared for scalability but lack the financial resources necessary to expand. Stakeholders in public education and curriculum development specialists at universities should partner to rapidly grow programs capable of delivering specialized training to teachers.
4. Coordinated Town Hall Forums: In order to raise national awareness of the issue, the subject of religious and identity-based bullying should be discussed through a series of tightly coordinated public forums around the country. School administrators face tremendous public and political pressure and therefore may not be in a position to advocate on sensitive social and cultural issues. Therefore, civil society organizations such as interfaith networks, nonprofits, and civic associations should provide platforms to host critical public-facing conversations.
5. Multimedia Story-Telling Development: Sharing the stories of students, teachers, and community members impacted by bullying is a proven way to advance advocacy and policy level discussions as well as provide learning resources for those in need. A multimedia story-telling platform should be developed to center the voices of impacted students and allied communities who have helped remedy the problem. Such a platform should involve students, community members, and public school teachers and/or administrators.

## APPENDIX I: PRACTITIONER AND SCHOLARLY RESOURCES

The following list of reports, institutes, and academic literature is intended to provide stakeholders with access to the latest and most relevant resources for those managing the problem of bias and bullying in public schools as it relates to Muslim students and those perceived as such. While the list is not comprehensive, it does represent an accurate snapshot of the institutional and intellectual landscape approaching this problem across the country.

### Islamophobia and Muslim Culture

- [Challenge Islamophobia](#) – This project addresses the root causes of Islamophobia by placing Islamophobia firmly within a U.S. context and shared cultural history. The lessons are designed to avoid the need for a facilitator with specialized knowledge in Islamic studies. The lessons do not teach the details of Islamic faith and practice because Islam is not the root of Islamophobia. The lessons invite learners to think differently by investigating Islamophobia as a form of racism born from empire.
    - A project of [Teaching for Change](#) and the [American Friends Service Committee](#), in collaboration with [Muslim ARC](#), [University of Illinois-Chicago College of Education](#), and the [Massachusetts Teachers Association](#).
  - [An Educator’s Guide to Islamic Religious Practices](#) – The information contained in this booklet is designed to inform educators about the sincerely-held and/or religiously mandated practices and beliefs of Muslim students, which at times require educators to provide religious accommodations in compliance with state and federal laws.
    - Prepared by [CAIR-California](#)
  - [Islamophobia.org](#) – An online resource on American Muslims and Islamophobia with reports and data on anti-Muslim bias incidents, anti-Muslim hate groups, and anti-Muslim laws.
- Recent reports include: [Hijacked by Hate](#) and [The Bias Brief](#).
- A project of CAIR
  - [Institute for Social Policy and Understanding](#) – ISPU conducts objective, solution-seeking research on American Muslims. Publications include surveys of American Muslim youth, American Muslim politics, and American Muslim philanthropy.
  - [Southern Poverty Law Center’s Extremist Files](#) – The Center tracks anti-Muslim hate groups across the country.
  - [Muslim ARC](#) – This human rights education organization works to raise awareness and train communities on issues of racial justice. In order to uproot racism, it focuses on developing and delivering education on internalized, interpersonal, and institutional racism. It offers consultation and training services.

### Curriculum Related Resources

- [Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools](#) – The Guiding Principles offer practical guidance for preparing curricula for teaching about religions and beliefs, preferred procedures for assuring fairness in the development of curricula, and standards for how they could be implemented. They do not propose a curriculum for teaching about religions and beliefs, nor do they promote any particular approach to the teaching about religions and beliefs. They highlight procedures and practices concerning the training of those who implement such curricula, and the treatment of the pupils from many different faith backgrounds who may be the recipients of such teaching.
  - Prepared by the [Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights Advisory Council of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief](#).
- [Georgetown University Teaching Workshops](#) – The Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding offers free professional development workshops customized

to meet the needs of the organizer—a school district, community center, university department, or private school. These workshops address the needs of teachers for content knowledge, teaching resources, and constitutional requirements, giving them confidence that they are on solid legal and pedagogical ground. The varied content provides basic knowledge about Islamic beliefs and practices, issues in world history and geography curriculum, integration of arts and sciences, material culture and trade across the centuries. Content modules are designed with state standards and the needs of Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses in mind.

- [“Interpreting Islam in American Schools.”](#) – This article reviews how Islam is taught in American schools and the historical processes that influence the current study of Islam and Muslim societies, while suggesting new models for curriculum development.
  - Published in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 588 by Susan L. Douglass and Ross E. Dunn.
- [Religious Studies Companion Document](#) – The National Council for the Social Studies added this supplement to its College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework for the academic study of religion in K-12 social studies instruction. This companion document recognizes religious studies as an essential part of the social studies curriculum. The [C3 Framework](#) is widely used by state and school district curriculum experts for social studies standards and curriculum development.
- [Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools](#) – These Guidelines are a resource for educators and interested citizens on how to teach about religion in constitutionally sound and intellectually responsible ways. They encourage student awareness of religions, exposing students to a diversity of religious views and educating students about all religions. Three premises inform the project: illiteracy regarding religion 1) is widespread, 2) fuels prejudice and

antagonism, and 3) can be diminished by teaching about religion in public schools in an academic way.

- Developed by the [American Academy of Religion \(AAR\)](#), [Religion in the Schools Task Force](#)
- [Zinn Education Project](#) – The Zinn Education Project promotes and supports the teaching of people’s history in middle and high school classrooms across the country. Based on the lens of history highlighted in Howard Zinn’s best-selling book *A People’s History of the United States*, the website offers free, downloadable lessons and articles organized by theme, time period, and reading level.
- [Teaching About Religion in Public School](#) – This report reflects the proceedings of a conference sponsored by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life and the First Amendment Center to look at how religion is currently treated in the public-school curriculum and explore what should be done in the future to address the place of religious studies across the curriculum. It involved people from a wide range of perspectives to consider these complex issues.
  - Produced by the First Amendment Center at the Freedom Forum and the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.
- [Countering Islamophobia](#) – This lesson - for grades 9-12 - explores, confronts and seeks to deconstruct stereotypes and fears targeted at Muslims. In small groups, students will analyze myths and misconceptions about Muslims. They will also understand the meaning of Islamophobia and its effects on Muslims, watch a video to understand the impact of Islamophobia and create an anti-Islamophobia campaign to display in school.
  - Developed by [Teaching Tolerance](#), a project of the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) that provides free resources to educators to prevent the growth of hate.
- [Muslim Journeys](#) – The Muslim Journeys Bookshelf is a collection of 25 books, 4 DVDs, and other programming resources selected to



help public audiences in the United States become more familiar with the people, places, history, faith, and cultures of Muslims around the world and within the U.S.

- [Islamic Networks Group Curricula](#) – The provided online curricula includes digital presentations related to teaching about Muslims and their faith, multifaith lessons, and a series of lessons on Muslim heroes. These curricula were designed to supplement content standards in social studies and world history and address many of the themes created by the National Council for the Social Studies Curriculum Standards and the National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA. Many of these themes are also addressed in state social studies content standards of leading states like California, Texas, and New York.

### Cultural Responsiveness and DEI

- [\*Leadership in troubled times: Culturally responsive leadership for minoritized youth\*](#) – A book by Muhammad Khalifa, faculty at University of Minnesota, that focuses on how school leaders can effectively serve minoritized students—those who have been historically marginalized in school and society. The book demonstrates how leaders can engage students, parents, teachers, and communities in ways that positively impact learning by honoring indigenous heritages and local cultural practices. Published with Harvard Education Press.
- [Culturally Responsive School Leadership: A Synthesis of the Literature](#) – Culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) has become important to research on culturally responsive education, reform, and social justice education. This comprehensive review provides a framework for the expanding body of literature that seeks to make not only teaching, but rather the entire school environment, responsive to the schooling needs of minoritized students.
- [Restorative Justice Books, Reports and Links](#) – A compilation of the best restorative justice books, reports and links for those working in the field.

- [Critical Race Theory in Education: A Review of Past Literature and a Look to the Future](#) – This article examines the development of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education, paying attention to how researchers use CRT in the study of K-12 and higher education. It reviews CRT literature with a focus on CRT scholarship that offers tools to engage with and work against racism within education. The authors highlight works that embody the critical origins of CRT in both the law and elsewhere, with a goal of demonstrating that CRT work means more than just pointing to race. It requires an engagement and articulation with the material, structural, and ideological mechanisms of White supremacy.
- [Kicking Online Bigotry Through Media](#) – In many cases, xenophobia and anti-Muslim rhetoric stem from a misunderstanding of Muslims and other similarly impacted communities. These misunderstandings build from misrepresentations in the media, and false, exaggerated narratives stimulated through social media platforms. Due to the recent rise in hate crimes targeting Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim including Sikh, Arab, Black and South Asian Americans, this guide focuses specifically on examples from these communities, but is really for anyone seeking to grow their media literacy skills to challenge online bigotry.
  - Developed by [America Indivisible](#).

### Anti-Bullying and Mental Health Resources

- [Religious-Based Bullying: Insights on Research and Evidence-Based Best Practices](#) – This brief provides insights from the first-ever National Interfaith Anti-Bullying Summit held in D.C. on December 2-3, 2017. The summit gathered a multitude of experts, including advocates, researchers, teachers, parents, physicians, mental health practitioners, and students, on the issue of the prevalence rates and negative mental health outcomes associated with religious-based bullying and its consideration as a public health issue in need of prevention and intervention attention.

- Prepared by the [Institute for Social Policy and Understanding](#) and [American Muslim Health Professionals](#).
- [Muslim Mental Health Toolkit](#) – This toolkit includes resources for individuals and mental health professionals to effectively address the unique mental health challenges that Muslims face. These challenges are not exclusive to adults. This toolkit also includes specific resources for addressing the needs of American Muslim children who face the added challenge of bullying from peers and adults, alike.
  - Prepared by the [Institute for Social Policy and Understanding](#)
- [Singled Out: Islamophobia in the Classroom and the Impact of Discrimination on Muslim Students](#) – This report provides an analysis and evaluation of the current public school climate for American Muslims in California. 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.
  - Prepared by [CAIR-California](#)
- [“Go Home Terrorist” A Report on Bullying Against Sikh American School Children](#) – A data driven report on bullying and harassment faced by Sikh American students with recommendations for Congress and for teachers and school educators.
- [National Bullying Prevention Center](#) – PACER’s National Bullying Prevention Center features community and educator resource kits, anti-bullying campaigns, and lesson plans for bullying prevention.
- [Bullying Prevention Toolkit](#) – This toolkit, prepared by the [Family and Youth Institute](#), includes resources for parents, school administrators, and youth to address school bullying.