



# Equity Dispatch

Religious Freedom and  
Discrimination in Education

November 2014



## **IMPACT: Educate, Engage, Empower - for Equity**

(Click words to navigate to sections)

*"Religious pluralism is neither mere coexistence nor forced consensus. It is a form of proactive cooperation that affirms the identity of the constituent communities while emphasizing that the well-being of each and all depends on the health of the whole. It is the belief that the common good is best served when each community has a chance to make its unique contribution. "*

**~ Eboo Patel, 2007**

## Educate

All children have a right to an education in an environment free of discrimination; schools are responsible for protecting students' civil rights. While harassment, bullying, and discrimination based on race/ethnicity or gender expression is frequently emphasized, harassment and discrimination based on religious expression are not. However, religious expression is often inextricable from one's race/ethnicity, national origin, and gender. This newsletter is focused on protection of religious freedom in schools as well as

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## Equity Spotlight

prevention of religious discrimination and harassment, particularly when religious identity intersects with other, perhaps more commonly discussed identities.

Educators should be aware of religion to make schools more inclusive and consider ways religious expression may intersect with curricular or co-curricular programs, discipline and attendance policies, access to school facilities, or even harassment and bullying. Inclusive educators teach about religion and allow students to explore their religious or non-religious identities while shedding light on stereotypes or misunderstandings that may lead to peer-to-peer harassment based on religious expression. Further, they are aware of covert and overt messages that any one religious practice is preferred, and are sensitive to education materials or policies that may promote religious stereotypes or endorse a particular religious view.

### **Adhering to the Law and Beyond: Thinking Critically About Religion**

Because public schools (including charter schools) are extensions of state and federal governments, they are restricted from endorsing a religion and from preventing religious expression. This is due to the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, which prevents state establishment of religion, and the Free Exercise Clause, which prevents the state from inhibiting religious expression. Schools must recognize students' and families' religious rights without creating conditions that suggest a preferred religious orientation. For legal guidance, educators, students, and families can seek out resources from organizations like the Anti-Defamation League (2012) and the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR) (see Ali, 2010), or a text like *Principals Teaching the Law* (Schimmel, Eckes, & Militello, 2010).

The law creates technical boundaries for what students and educators may or may not do in terms of religious expression, but laws are sometimes insufficient to address equity issues. It is important that educators critically reflect on contexts in which students are learning, examining how assumptions about students' religious identities may have a marginalizing effect. We present three interlocking critical perspectives to illustrate.

**Christian normativity.** Many districts do not have explicit policies regarding religious expression (Brown & Bowling, 2003). To some extent, this is because many districts have outdated handbooks; however, a second possibility is that schools operate under assumptions that students are (a) religious, and (b) of a Christian denomination. Nearly 51% of Americans identify as Protestant, and about 24% identify



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As the Director of CSR), he works in assisting the University of Michigan-Dearborn to accomplish goals set forth in its vision: "to achieve a major impact in meeting the needs of our region's evolving economy, environment, and culture." The CSRS provides space on campus for the interdisciplinary scholarly

as Catholic (Gallup, 2013), so it is reasonable to conclude that many educators assume their students are also Christian, and that districts have built their curricula and policies around that assumption. Such an assumption, called Christian normativity, is “embedded within the racialized social system of the United States” and keeps Christianity the dominant perspective in school operations (Kamran, 2012, p. 14). Indeed, the conflation of Christianity and whiteness in the U.S. has historically led to marginalization of people who are not Christian and/or are not White. Students or parents who are neither White nor Christian have an especially difficult time fitting in at school (Joshi, 2006).

**Racialization of religion.** Religion and racial/ethnic identities are tightly linked, particularly in the U.S. This is because American society is highly racialized. Racialization is the process by which racial classification and meaning are imposed on a group of people previously unclassified (Omi & Winant, 1994). For example, Somali refugees in Minnesota have been racialized as Black; however, when they lived in Somalia, no such racial meaning existed for them (Bigelow, 2008). In other words, while in Somalia, they were not “Black” as Americans construct “Black” as a race. Furthermore, because race and religion are so tightly linked, religion is racialized—“a phenomenon wherein the fact that of an individual’s race creates a presumption as to her religious identity” (Joshi, 2006, p. 212, emphasis in original). School-based inequities around race can also quickly become inequity issues of religion. But at the same time, it is important that these two issues are both distinct and intertwined. Responding only to inequities students experience on the basis of racial identities neglects the complex intersection of race, religion, nationality, gender, class, and citizenship status that affect children in schools.

**Religious expression as identity expression.** It is important that educators not think of historically marginalized students solely as victims. Some students express religious identity as a means of resistance to marginalization. For example, the hijab, a veil worn by some Islamic women in some contexts, can be worn as a symbol of cultural and national pride, as a purely religious expression and interpretation of Islamic law, or even as a demonstration to resist harmful stereotypes (Bigelow, 2008; Khan, 2002). Some well-meaning people may interpret the relationship between religion and gender as oppressive, particularly in the Islamic faith; however, many Muslim women are more focused on religious expression in the U.S. than in their country of origin to retain a connection to their home country and also to debunk negative stereotypes about Muslim communities (Gregory, 2014). Other forms of religious expression include skullcaps worn by men, long

research and teaching on religion and its impact within the community. As a center, its diverse faculty and student support has worked together to write profiles and collect documents and ethnographic materials from over 250 religious centers and interreligious organizations. Together with the Pluralism Project’s outreach to the campus and wider community, CSRS put together an exhibition, “World Religions in Metropolitan Detroit,” which featured 55 of the 1000 photographs of religious settings, along with corresponding text panels, the community’s map, and, when available, selections of audio recordings from the associated religious centers. Students at the university as well as local residents were invited to experience the variety of faiths found in their own community and their role in American life.

His work and efforts has contributed to the CSRS Worldviews Seminar, the center’s most successful project to date. The Worldviews Seminar is a one-week course in religious diversity and dialogue for undergraduate and graduate students, seminarians, and community leaders in local congregations, schools, and hospitals. As a result of the

hair or beards, forms of dress, or other religious accoutrements. Educators should be sensitive to these and other forms of religious expression, by both students and families.

## **Common Victims of Religious Harassment and Discrimination**

Researchers have identified several groups for whom harassment or discrimination based on religion commonly occur. Recent world engagement with the Middle East has yielded a great deal of misunderstanding of Islam around the world (Haque, 2004), and individuals who are practicing Muslims—or even perceived to be Muslim based on racialization of religion—are one of these groups (see van Driel, 2004). Closely linked with Islamophobia, Hindus and Sikhs are also often victims of religion-based harassment or discrimination (Joshi, 2006). Anti-Semitism continues to drive religious harassment and discrimination of Jewish students. Discrimination of Jewish students led to the OCR to generate a Dear Colleague letter alerting schools that OCR will prosecute if schools fail to adequately respond to this form of harassment (Ali, 2010; Marcus, 2010). Because of the relationship between race/ethnicity, national origin, and religion, refugee communities may be particularly vulnerable to religious discrimination and harassment. Finally, atheist and non-religious students and parents can also be victims of discrimination or harassment, and atheists and the non-religious do report high levels of discrimination in schools (Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer, & Nielsen, 2012).

## **Recommendations**

Tackling discrimination and harassment of any kind is a difficult and on-going process. Here are a few considerations for schools and districts.

- Schools should have clear policies on religious freedom and on religious discrimination and harassment (Brown & Bowling, 2003). These policies should comply with law and with OCR's guidelines as described in the 2010 Dear Colleague letter (see Ali, 2010). The Anti-Defamation League (2012) also has some legal guidance, particularly regarding religious holidays. Enforcement of these policies is dependent upon having clear definitions of discrimination and of harassment (Marcus, 2010).
- All school personnel should be adequately trained to be aware of issues of religious freedom and diversity (Ali, 2010), particularly the phenomenon of racialization (Joshi, 2006; Omi & Winant, 1994;

Worldview Seminar, local K-12 school districts are using Worldviews as a model to increase interreligious awareness of youth. As both a Professor at the University of Michigan-Dearborn and a Director of two interfaith organizations, Dr. Jacobs believes that it is important for other education professional to know about interfaith work and religious diversity because "interfaith work is tremendously exciting and enriching." He continues by stating it can also be difficult: "While there must be respect (often meaning tolerance) for others' religions ... there is a need to move beyond both of these positions. Interfaith work means that we must take the religions of others, and their worldviews, seriously, even to the point where we question our own."

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## **Upcoming Events**

### **Illinois**

December 9-12

38th Annual Statewide Conference for Teachers Serving Linguistically and Culturally Diverse

Schmidt, 2002). To help educators better understand and accommodate students' required religious practices, some of this training should engage parents (Bigelow, 2008).

- Educators and students should be aware of various stereotypes of a variety of religious and atheist traditions, particularly of the religious and atheist traditions they are likely to have in their schools. Typical stereotypes like Muslims are irrational (see Haque, 2004 and; Shah, 2006 for developed lists of Muslim stereotypes), or that atheists lack morality (Cook, Cottrell, & Webster, 2014; Doane & Elliott, 2014; Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Hammer, Cragun, Hwang, & Smith, 2012) can seep into curriculum and into interactions with students and parents.
- Schools should promote language that openly discusses religious diversity in the classroom, and responses to religious discrimination nor harassment should emphasize critical dialogue over punishment (Ali, 2010). Religious symbols can be used in classroom when part of the secular curriculum (Anti-Defamation League, 2012).
- Students should be encouraged to explore their own identities and the religious, or non-religious identities of others, and all students should explore racialization as a phenomenon in the U.S. (Bigelow, 2008).

[Back to Top](#)

## Engage



The Center for Interfaith Cooperation (CIC), located in Indianapolis, Indiana, was established three-years ago by

Students

Oak Brook, IL

### Indiana

December 14-16

Indiana Association for  
the Gifted Conference  
Indianapolis, IN

### Michigan

December 8-9

Conference for Michigan  
Kindergarten Teachers  
Livonia, MI

### Minnesota

December 6-7, 8-9

TIES: Education  
Technology Conference  
Minneapolis, MN

### Ohio

December 8

Ohio Literacy  
Conference for K-3rd  
Grade Teachers  
Columbus, OH

### Wisconsin

December 8-10

School Leaders  
Advancing Technology in  
Education (SLATE)  
Convention  
Wisconsin Dells

individuals coming together with the common goal to genuinely build trusting and understanding relationships in central Indiana. According Charlie Wiles, Executive Director, the CIC motto, “Hoosiers of many faiths in community,” is the heartbeat behind the work at the organization. The purpose of CIC is not to attain world peace but instead to find ways for people from diverse religious traditions to come together with a common purpose and build the community. CIC strives to strengthen the community by supporting, fostering, and connecting faith communities through social and educational opportunities, volunteer services, and civic engagements.

In order to meet the interfaith needs in central Indiana, CIC adheres to three central purposes: cooperation, strengthening partnerships, and service. In seeking cooperation, CIC not only engages with local celebrations and inter-faith activities but also hosts programs to explore religious conflict and peacemaking. CIC believes that individuals must engage in dialogue with each other concerning both the similarities and differences of religious communities, faiths, and values to address social problems within a community. Each year, the CIC strengthens partnerships and educates the community through the Festival of Faith. Just this fall 2000 community members, 100 congregations, 22 community organizations, and 9 Universities gathered for the Festival in downtown Indianapolis. Together they embraced religious diversity through celebration, dialogue, and cultural experiences.

A major program of CIC is their Immigrant/Refugee Service Core (IRSC). The purpose of IRSC is to engage in meaningful relationships with immigrants and refugees in Indianapolis. For example, through a collaborative effort with the Indianapolis Art Center, young artist were paired with foreign-born adults to share stories relating to their immigration and to create art depicting the journey. Art is often a vessel used to open interfaith dialogue. In the near future, CIC hopes to connect immigrant/refugee families to mentors who will help families navigate structural systems, such as school, legal policy, and housing, and more generally the American culture. As it relates to education, Mr. Wiles urges educators to “keep an open mind, be inclusive, ask questions, and don’t be afraid to address faith.” American and world history is entrenched with religions, faith, and atheism. With your students, explore what influences faith, spirituality, and atheism have on history and how they contribute to your community. Embrace the diversity.

**[Back to Top](#)**

# Empower



## Something to Watch!

*Waking in Oak Creek*

One way to sensitize individuals to the marginalized experiences of a community is through film and performance. *Waking in Oak Creek*, a PBS film produced by Not In Our Town, highlights actual treatment of the Sikh community in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, following the terror attacks on September 11th, 2001. Sikhs are the 5th largest religious group in the U.S., and hate crimes against this population surged in the aftermath of 9/11. Not In Our Town is a non-profit supporting inclusive dialogues in communities and has developed lesson plans and other resources to supplement the film.

## Something to Explore!

*Ravel Unravel*



Ravel Unravel is a multimedia project from Project Interfaith that explores various aspects of religious, spiritual, and cultural identity. The videos available on the site aim to create critical dialogues about spiritual and religious identities that make up our communities. The site offers college and adult education curricula, and middle and high school curricula are in development.



## Something to Use!

*Teaching Tolerance Toolkit*

Teaching Tolerance is a compendium of free educational materials for teachers and other school practitioners dedicated to ensuring equal opportunity and promoting an appreciation for diversity and a respect for differences in schools. The materials include some guidelines for a simple approach to appreciation of religious diversity and The Tips for Starting a World Religions Curriculum.

## Back to Top

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