


















# EXAMINING ISLAMOPHOBIA IN CALIFORNIA SCHOOLS



2021 BULLYING REPORT

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## ABOUT CAIR-CA

**T**he Council on American-Islamic Relations is the largest American Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States. CAIR’s mission is to enhance understanding of Islam, protect civil liberties, promote justice, and empower American Muslims. CAIR California is the organization’s largest and oldest chapter, with offices in the Greater Los Angeles Area, the Sacramento Valley / Central California, San Diego, and the San Francisco Bay Area.

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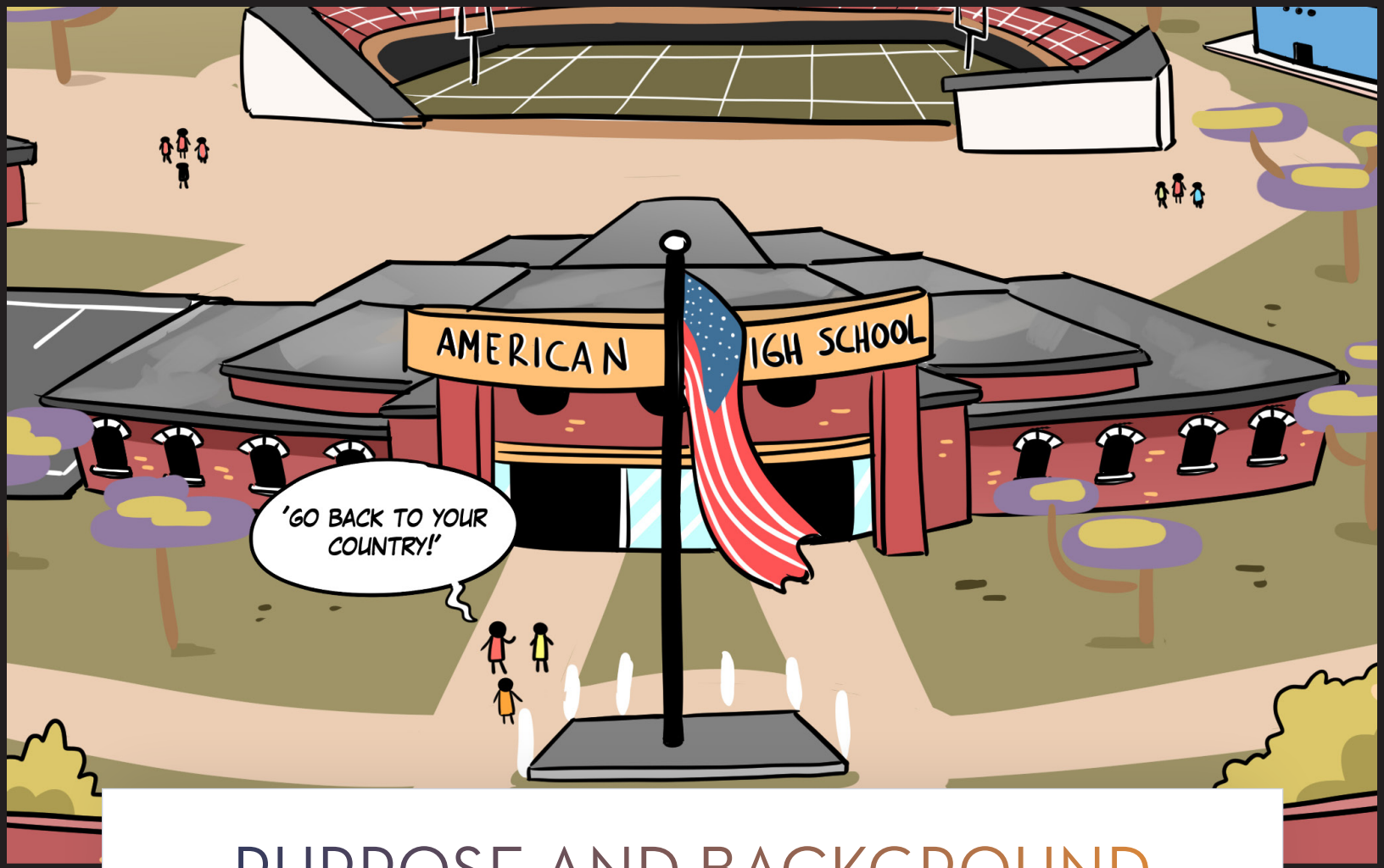
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## PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

This report is the fifth biennial bullying report published by the California Chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR-CA). These reports evaluate the current school climate for California Muslim students between the ages of 11 and 18.

The purpose of this report, and the ones preceding it, is to understand the extent to which Islamophobia, the prejudice against or hatred of Islam and Muslims, manifests itself in the school environment in the form of bullying and discrimination from peers, teachers, administrators, and other adult school personnel.

In general, school bullying is understood as causing one to feel unsafe, fearful, or unable to fully participate in school.<sup>1</sup> Bullying involves a real or perceived imbalance of power, with the powerful person or group attacking those who are less powerful. Bullying may be physical (hitting, kicking,

spitting, pushing), verbal (taunting, malicious teasing, name calling, threatening), or emotional (spreading rumors, manipulating social relationships, extorting, intimidating).<sup>2</sup> Bullying can occur in person or electronically through the creation and transmission of public posts, messages, texts, sounds, or images.<sup>3</sup>

Youth involved in bullying – as both victims and aggressors – are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors than their uninvolved peers.<sup>4</sup> The negative effects of bullying persist even after the abuse has stopped and are linked to a wide range of physical, mental, social, and economic challenges in adulthood.<sup>5</sup>

CAIR-CA's 2021 report is the result of a survey distributed between January 2021 and August 2021 asking Muslim students in California about their experiences with bullying and Islamophobia from August 2018 to August 2021.

# CAIR-CA'S 2021 SURVEY FINDS THAT BULLYING REMAINS A COMMON OCCURRENCE THAT HAS DISPROPORTIONATELY IMPACTED MUSLIM STUDENTS

The survey examined how the pandemic affected the way these students experienced bullying. The survey also examined how Muslim students felt about their school environment and whether they experienced any discrimination from teachers, school administrators, and other adult school personnel.

The survey was conducted by the four CAIR-CA offices covering the Greater Los Angeles, Sacramento Valley / Central California, San Diego, and San Francisco Bay Area areas. 891 individuals responded to our survey. 708 of the respondents were eligible to take the survey in that they were: 1) between 11-18 years-old; 2) Muslim; 3) attended school in California; and 4) attended either a public school, non-Islamic private school, or charter school.

The survey was divided into three sections. The first section asked for respondents' demographic information. The second section requested

information about the type of bullying and discrimination respondents experienced at school as either the victim or bystander. The third section asked respondents how they perceived their school environment and whether adults in their school had engaged in Islamophobic behavior.

CAIR-CA's 2021 survey finds that bullying remains a common occurrence that has disproportionately impacted Muslim students. CAIR-CA's 2021 and 2019 reports show that Muslim students reported being bullied at more than twice the reported national average of 20%.

The trends in bullying and the current rate at which Muslim students experience bullying provide insight to community organizations, educators, school administrators, and parents on how best to address and prevent Islamophobic bullying.





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**T**here are several key findings from the results of CAIR-CA's 2021 survey that show that Muslim students in California continue to report high levels of Islamophobic bullying, harassment, and discrimination by both peers and adults, both in-person and online. Respondents reported that these experiences have a negative impact on their educational experience and their comfort levels at school.

**FIRST, 47.1% of respondents reported being bullied for being Muslim in the year-and-half period prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic.** However, the switch to remote learning and the decrease in in-person interactions amongst students significantly reduced reported incidents of bullying to 26.22%. Pre-pandemic rates of bullying increased by 7 percentage points when compared to CAIR-CA's 2019 report, which evaluated the school climate for California Muslim students between 2016 and mid-2018. Our current survey results show that the decrease in in-person interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic correlated to a decrease in all forms of bullying incidents.

**SECOND, 55.73% of all respondents reported feeling unsafe, unwelcome, or uncomfortable at school because of their Muslim identity.** This is the highest reported level since CAIR-CA began conducting its biennial surveys in 2013. Furthermore, nearly 20% of respondents reported missing school because of those feelings. This is an upward trend from the 13.76% of respondents who reported missing school in our 2019 report.

**THIRD,** female respondents also had their unique challenges when it came to feeling comfortable at school given that **nearly one out of every three respondents (30.12%) who wear a hijab, reported their hijab was tugged, pulled, or offensively touched.**

**FOURTH,** approximately one-third of respondents experienced or witnessed some form of cyberbullying. During the period from August 2018 to August 2021, **29.72% of respondents reported that a student at school made offensive comments or posts about Islam or Muslims directly to them on social media.** This is up from 12.19% of respondents in CAIR-CA's 2019 report. Additionally, 35.68% responded that other students at

their school made offensive comments about Islam or Muslims in general on social media.

**FIFTH, nearly one in four respondents (23.50%) reported that a teacher, administrator, or other adult at their school made offensive comments about Islam or Muslims.** Muslim students reported high levels of Islamophobic harassment and comments from teachers and other school personnel who are responsible for the well-being of these students.

**FINALLY, pre-pandemic, 60.81% of those who were themselves bullied reported seeing another student get bullied for being Muslim** in comparison to only 21.54% of those who were not themselves bullied. This data suggests that some schools allow bullying to go unchecked thus encouraging more bullying while other schools take a more proactive approach to creating an inclusive and more welcome environment where bullying is not tolerated.

The responses to CAIR-CA's survey suggest that Islamophobic harassment, discrimination, and bullying continue to be real issues that Muslim students face on a daily basis. These findings present insight into how educators can combat Islamophobia and bullying to ensure that Muslim students have a positive educational experience.

For example, the drop in bullying numbers due to the COVID-19 pandemic provides insight into how educators can vigilantly and immediately address incidents of bullying. The decrease in unsupervised in-person interactions caused by remote learning led to a decrease in bullying in all forms. Educators and administrators who are aware of bullying incidents must immediately act to increase adult supervision of the aggressor and physically separate the bully from the victim to decrease in-person interactions.

School districts' response to the COVID-19 pandemic proves that these systems are capable of changing their entire educational model to be more responsive to the well-being of their students. It is evident that school districts are similarly capable of being responsive to the experiences and wellbeing of Muslim students. CAIR-CA urges our schools to make the changes necessary to ensure the wellbeing of Muslim students and all vulnerable students are protected. In addition to taking immediate steps to address specific incidents of bullying, schools should conduct a thorough assessment of the school's environment as it pertains to Islamophobia and anti-Muslim bias and bullying; improving and implementing thorough anti-bullying policies and training; and implementing curriculum that is anti-racist and inclusive.

**47.1%**

**OF  
RESPONDENTS  
REPORTED  
BEING  
BULLIED**

**55.73%**

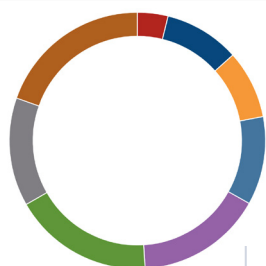
**OF  
RESPONDENTS  
REPORTED  
FEELING  
UNSAFE**

**30.12%**

**OF  
RESPONDENTS  
REPORTED  
THEIR HIJAB WAS  
OFFENSIVELY  
TOUCHED**

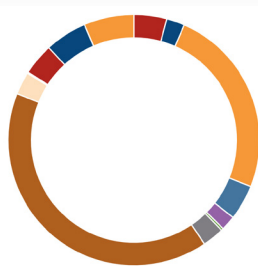


# SURVEY FINDINGS



## SCHOOL GRADES

5th Grade	26	3.86%
6th Grade	64	9.51%
7th Grade	58	8.62%
8th Grade	75	11.14%
9th Grade	107	15.90%
10th Grade	119	17.68%
11th Grade	92	13.67%
12th Grade	132	19.61%



## DEMOGRAPHICS

### ETHNICITY AND RACE

Black / African American	29	4.23%
Black / African	16	2.33%
Middle Eastern	168	24.49%
North African	31	4.52%
White / Caucasian	13	1.90%
Latino / Hispanic	2	0.29%
East Asian	19	2.77%
South Asian	278	40.52%
Central Asian	20	2.92%
Pacific Islander	1	0.15%
Multi-Ethnic	28	4.08%
Did not disclose	37	5.39%
Other	44	6.41%





# DEMOGRAPHICS

## RESPONDENTS GENDER

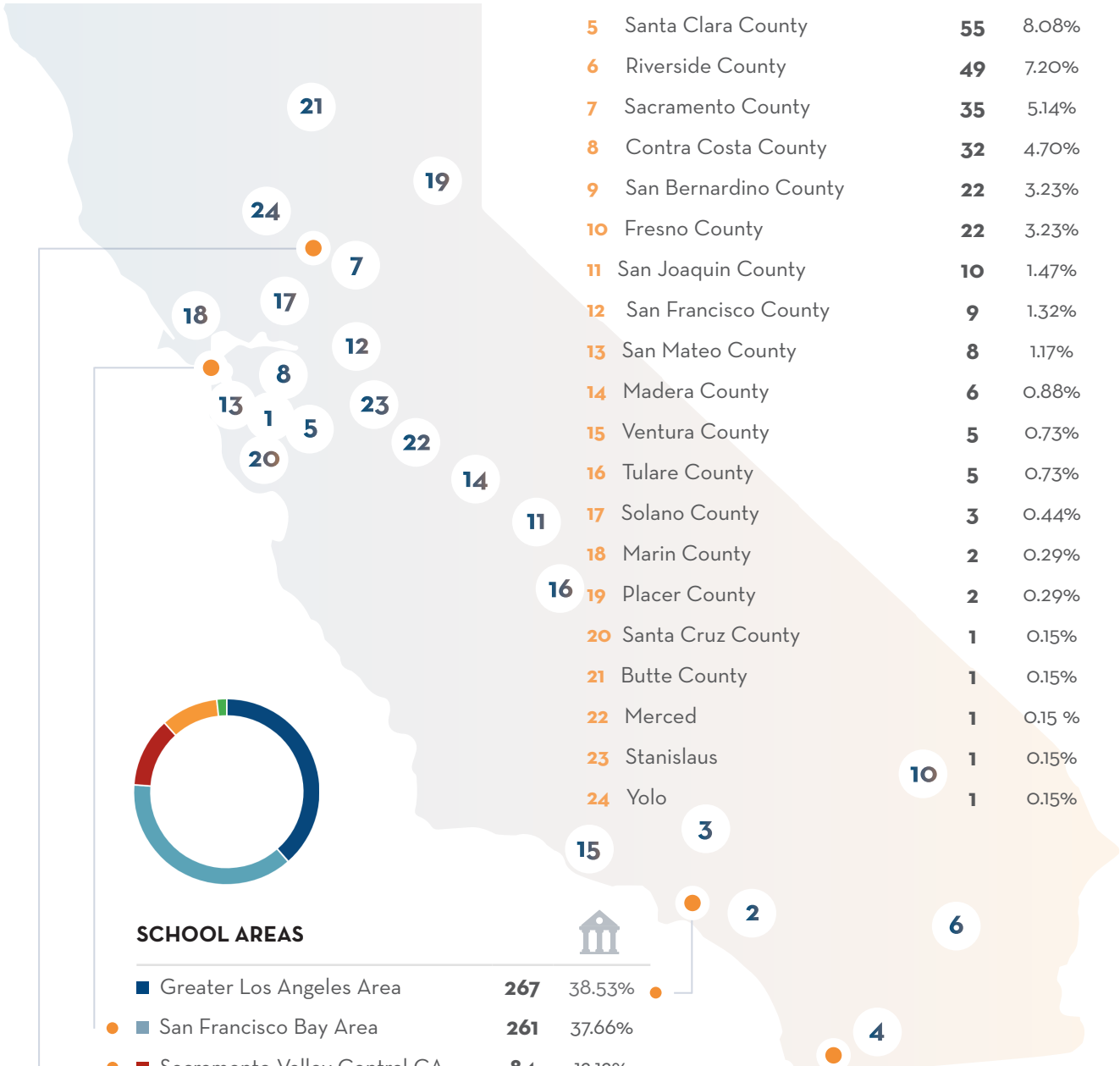


Female	370	53.47%
Male	307	44.36%
Did not disclose	15	2.17%

## RESPONDENTS BY COUNTY



1	Alameda County	151	22.18%
2	Orange County	116	17.03%
3	Los Angeles County	75	11.01%
4	San Diego County	69	10.13%
5	Santa Clara County	55	8.08%
6	Riverside County	49	7.20%
7	Sacramento County	35	5.14%
8	Contra Costa County	32	4.70%
9	San Bernardino County	22	3.23%
10	Fresno County	22	3.23%
11	San Joaquin County	10	1.47%
12	San Francisco County	9	1.32%
13	San Mateo County	8	1.17%
14	Madera County	6	0.88%
15	Ventura County	5	0.73%
16	Tulare County	5	0.73%
17	Solano County	3	0.44%
18	Marin County	2	0.29%
19	Placer County	2	0.29%
20	Santa Cruz County	1	0.15%
21	Butte County	1	0.15%
22	Merced	1	0.15%
23	Stanislaus	1	0.15%
24	Yolo	1	0.15%



## SCHOOL AREAS



■ Greater Los Angeles Area	267	38.53%
● ■ San Francisco Bay Area	261	37.66%
● ■ Sacramento Valley Central CA	84	12.12%
■ San Diego Area	69	9.96%
■ Did not input a legible or identifiable response	12	1.73%

# BULLYING

**47.1%**

**RESPONDENTS BULLIED  
PRIOR TO COVID-19**

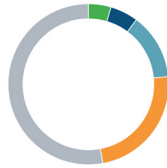
Compare to **40.04%** from the 2019 Report

**26.22%**

**RESPONDENTS BULLIED  
DURING COVID-19**

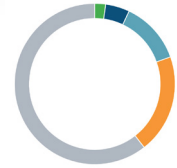
**20.88%** points drop from prior to the pandemic

From August 2018 to March 2020, how often have you been bullied at school for being Muslim?



Very often (once a week or more)	29	4.54%
Often (once a month)	36	5.63%
Sometimes (3-6 a year)	85	13.30%
Rarely (1-2 times a year)	151	23.63%
Never	338	52.90%

From March 2020 to now, how often have you been bullied at school for being Muslim?



Very often (once a week or more)	8	1.30%
Often (once a month)	17	2.77%
Sometimes (3-6 a year)	39	6.35%
Rarely (1-2 times a year)	97	15.80%
Never	453	73.78%

**39.46%**

**OBSERVED OTHERS BEING  
BULLIED PRIOR TO COVID-19**

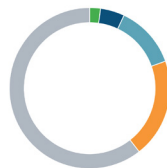
Consistent with **39.01%** in the 2019 Report

**23.13%**

**OBSERVED OTHERS BEING  
BULLIED DURING COVID-19**

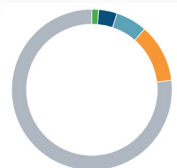
**16.33%** points drop from prior to the pandemic

How often have you seen another student at school being bullied for being Muslim from August 2018 to March 2020?



Very often (once a week or more)	13	2.17%
Often (once a month)	29	4.85%
Sometimes (3-6 a year)	75	12.54%
Rarely (1-2 times a year)	119	19.90%
Never	362	60.54%

How often have you seen another student at school being bullied for being Muslim from March 2020 to present?



Very often (once a week or more)	8	1.36%
Often (once a month)	22	3.74%
Sometimes (3-6 a year)	37	6.29%
Rarely (1-2 times a year)	69	11.73%
Never	452	76.87%

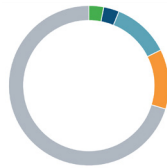
**29.72%**

**REPORTED SEEING PEERS MAKE ISLAMOPHOBIC SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS  
DIRECT POST AT STUDENT**

**35.68%**

**GENERAL POST ON ISLAM**

How often do students at your school make offensive comments or posts about Islam or Muslims directly towards you on Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram?



Very often (once a week or more)	17	2.97%
Often (once a month)	18	3.15%
Sometimes (3-6 a year)	66	11.54%
Rarely (1-2 times a year)	69	12.06%
Never	402	70.28%

How often do students at your school make offensive comments or posts about Islam or Muslims in general on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram?



Very often (once a week or more)	13	2.28%
Often (once a month)	32	5.62%
Sometimes (3-6 a year)	72	12.65%
Rarely (1-2 times a year)	86	15.11%
Never	366	64.32%

**30.12%**

**HAD HIJAB TUGGED, PULLED, OR OFFENSIVELY TOUCHED**

If you wear hijab, how often have you had your hijab tugged, pulled, or in any way offensively touched by another student?

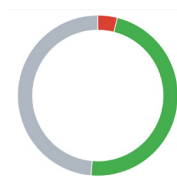


Very often (once a week or more)	6	1.06%
Often (once a month)	6	1.06%
Sometimes (3-6 a year)	11	1.94%
Rarely (1-2 times a year)	27	4.76%
Never	116	20.46%
Not Applicable	401	70.72%

**47.43%**

**REPORTED A DECREASE IN BULLYING SINCE SWITCHING TO REMOTE LEARNING**

If your school has transitioned to an exclusive or partial online teaching model because of COVID-19, has this increased or decreased your experiences of bullying?



Increased	23	3.94%
Decreased	277	47.43%
Stayed the same	284	48.63%

# SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

**1 OUT OF 4**

**REPORTED AN ADULT AT SCHOOL MAKING ISLAMOPHOBIC COMMENTS**

**55.73%**

**FELT UNSAFE AT SCHOOL BECAUSE THEY WERE MUSLIM**

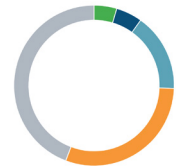
Highest % since this survey began in 2013

Has a teacher, administrator, or other adult at your school made offensive comments about Islam or Muslims?



Yes	137	23.5%
No	446	76.5%

How often have you felt unsafe, unwelcome, or uncomfortable at school because of your Muslim identity?



Very often (once a week or more)	26	4.59%
Often (once a month)	30	5.29%
Sometimes (3-6 a year)	89	15.70%
Rarely (1-2 times a year)	171	30.16%
Never	251	44.27%

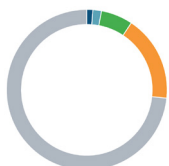
**26.64%**

**REPORTED AN ADULT AT SCHOOL MAKING ISLAMOPHOBIC COMMENTS DIRECT AT STUDENT**

**27.6%**

**GENERAL ON ISLAM**

How often do teachers, administrators, or other adults at your school make offensive comments towards you about Islam or Muslims?



Very often (once a week or more)	7	1.21%
Often (once a month)	10	1.73%
Sometimes (3-6 a year)	37	6.40%
Rarely (1-2 times a year)	100	17.30%
Never	424	73.36%

How often do teachers, administrators, or other adults at your school make offensive comments about Islam or Muslims in general?



Very often (once a week or more)	6	1.04%
Often (once a month)	9	1.56%
Sometimes (3-6 a year)	41	7.12%
Rarely (1-2 times a year)	103	17.88%
Never	417	72.40%

**19.6%**

**MISSED SCHOOL DUE TO FEELING UNSAFE AND UNWELCOME**

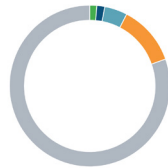
Compare to **13.76%** in the 2019 Report

**25.31%**

**RESPONDENTS RECEIVED SUPPORT FROM SCHOOL STAFF**

**11.32%** did not receive resolution to their problem

**How often have you missed school because you felt unsafe, unwelcome, or uncomfortable at school?**



Very often (once a week or more)	8	1.41%
Often (once a month)	9	1.59%
Sometimes (3-6 a year)	26	4.59%
Rarely (1-2 times a year)	68	12.01%
Never	455	80.39%

**Agree or disagree: "When I told a teacher, administrator, or another adult at my school about an issue I faced because I am a Muslim, it helped solve the problem."**



Strongly Agree	53	9.38%
Agree	90	15.93%
Neutral	96	16.99%
Disagree	45	7.96%
Strongly Disagree	19	3.36%
Not Applicable	262	46.37%

**1 OUT OF 5**

**DID NOT FEEL LESSONS ON ISLAM AND MUSLIMS WERE FAIR**

Compare to **14%** in the 2019 Report

**32.04%**

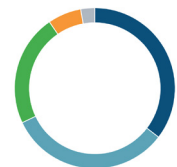
**DID NOT FEEL COMFORTABLE SHARING THEIR MUSLIM IDENTITY**

**Agree or disagree: "When my teachers taught lessons about Islam or Muslims, they did so in a neutral, fair, and factual manner."**



Strongly Agree	104	18.41%
Agree	175	30.97%
Neutral	114	20.18%
Disagree	76	13.45%
Strongly Disagree	34	6.02%
Not Applicable	62	10.97%

**Agree or disagree: "I feel comfortable letting teachers and classmates know that I am Muslim."**



Strongly Agree	200	35.40%
Agree	184	32.57%
Neutral	127	22.48%
Disagree	38	6.73%
Strongly Disagree	16	2.83%
Not Applicable	0	0.00%

# IN THEIR OWN WORDS



**PEOPLE WOULD MAKE JOKES ABOUT 9-11 TOWARDS ME AND MAKE ME FEEL LIKE I WAS TO BLAME FOR IT.**

17-year-old South Asian Male. Public School, Madera.



**I WAS CONSTANTLY CALLED OSAMA BIN LADIN BY THE SAME GUY WHO WOULD TELL ME THAT I LOOKED BOMB WITH A BIG EMPHASIS ON THE WORD BOMB. I TOLD MY SCHOOL ABOUT MY EXPERIENCE THEY TOLD ME THAT [I] WAS BEING DRAMATIC. [I] ASKED ONE OF MY TEACHERS SEPARATELY IF [I] COULD MOVE MY SEAT AND SHE HAD TOLD ME NO.**



18-year-old Middle Eastern Female. Public School, Corona.



**ONE TEACHER SAID THAT WE ARE A RELIGION OF BLOOD AND WAR AND THAT ALL WE WANT IS THE END OF ALL HUMANS.**

17-year-old Middle Eastern Male. Public School, Elk Grove.





**SOMEONE ASKED ME IF I WAS GOING TO BLOW UP THE SCHOOL AND IF I WAS READING A BOOK ON BOMBS.**

14-year-old Middle Eastern Male. Public School, Livermore.



**I WAS ... ABUSED AND CALLED A 'TERRORIST', 'SAND N-WORD', AND 'OSAMA BIN LADEN'S NIECE'. I WAS PERSONALLY TARGETED BY A GROUP OF INDIVIDUALS AND THEY SUPPORTED THE MUSLIM BAN BECAUSE MOST TERRORISTS ARE MUSLIM. I PURPOSELY WOULD SKIP SCHOOL ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF 9/11 BUT BE QUESTIONED ABOUT IT BY PEERS ASKING IF I WAS PLOTTING SOMETHING.**



18-year-old Central Asian Female. Public School, Brentwood.



**SOME PERSON HAD TOLD ME THAT 'DONALD TRUMP IS GOING TO KICK YOU OUT OF THE UNITED STATES AND SEND YOU BACK TO WHERE YOU CAME FROM'.**

12-year-old Middle Eastern Female. Public School, San Diego.





**PEOPLE HAVE VERBALLY ABUSED ME FOR BEING MUSLIM, MOCKED ME AND ISLAM AND I HAVE HAD MY HIJAB PULLED OFF BY A CLASSMATE FOR NO REASON.**



18-year-old Middle Eastern Female. Public School, Redwood City.

**MY SCIENCE TEACHER TOLD ME THAT 'MY TYPE' LIKES FLYING PLANES INTO BUILDINGS.**



14-year-old South Asian Male. Public School, Fremont.

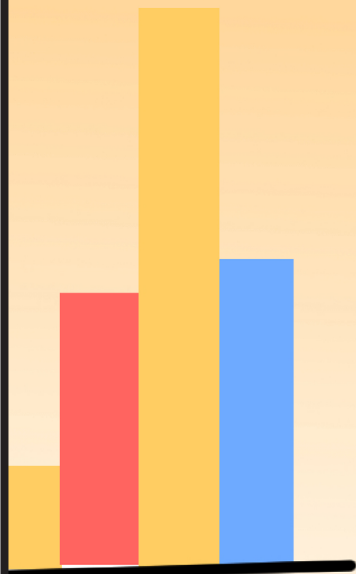


**MY TEACHER ATTACKED ME IN FRONT OF MY CLASS SAYING THINGS LIKE 'TERRORIST' AND 'YOU DON'T BELONG HERE'.**

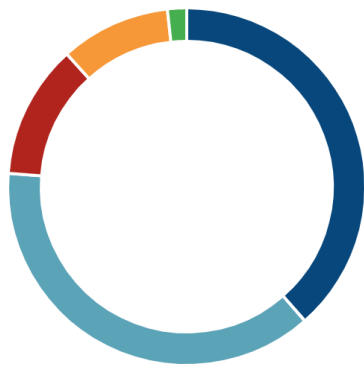


18-year-old Middle Eastern Female. Public School, Redwood City.





## ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS



### SCHOOL AREAS

■ Greater Los Angeles Area	<b>267</b>	38.53%
■ San Francisco Bay Area	<b>261</b>	37.66%
■ Sacramento Valley Central CA	<b>84</b>	12.12%
■ San Diego Area	<b>69</b>	9.96%
■ Did not input a legible or identifiable response	<b>12</b>	1.73%

### DIVERSE SURVEY RESPONDENTS

**T**he respondents of the survey were diverse in terms of their geographic location, gender identity, and race/ethnicity. 38.53% reported being from the Greater Los Angeles area (covering the counties of Orange, Los Angeles, Ventura, Santa Barbara, and Riverside); 37.66% reported being from the San Francisco Bay area (covering the counties of Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Monterey, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Solano, and Sonoma); 12.12% reported being from the Sacramento Valley/Central California area (covering the counties of Butte, El Dorado, Placer, Yolo, Sacramento, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Madera, Fresno, and Tulare); and 9.96% reported being from the San Diego area (covering the counties of San Diego and Imperial).

53.47% of respondents identified as female and 44.36% identified as male. The respondents were also diverse across racial and ethnic identities. The two racial/ethnic identities that respondents reported the most were South Asian (40.52%) and Middle Eastern (24.49%).

## COVID-19 IMPACTED EXPERIENCES WITH BULLYING

In March 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic forced the majority of California students into remote learning, which greatly impacted bullying patterns.

47.1% of respondents reported being bullied for being Muslim from August 2018 to March 2020, the period preceding the remote learning transition. This indicates an upward trend of bullying incidents as compared to CAIR-CA's 2019 report, which found that an already high percentage of students (40.04%) reported anti-Muslim bullying. The 2019 report evaluated the school climate for California Muslim students between 2016 and mid-2018.

However, once schools switched to remote learning in March 2020, the percentage of reported bullying incidents dropped significantly across all mediums. 26.22% of respondents reported being bullied at school for being Muslim from March 2020 to August 2021. While this is still a significant percentage, this represents a notable decrease from the over year-and-a-half period prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic decreased the frequency of in-person interactions amongst students and shifted bullying dynamics. Studies have found that the lack of in-person interactions amongst students led to a decrease in bullying in all forms.<sup>6</sup> In-person interaction amongst students is an important mechanism underlying not only in-person school bullying, but also cyberbullying.<sup>7</sup> Research suggests that both in-person bullying and cyberbullying decreased during the school years affected by the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> The decrease in all forms of bullying is consistent with prior evidence that cyberbullying is strongly associated with in-person school bullying and primarily reflects in-person bullying enacted through a different medium.<sup>9</sup> As such,

the drop in bullying across all mediums is not surprising given that California had the lowest rate of in-person school attendance across the country since the pandemic began.<sup>10</sup>

Many respondents highlighted that the lack of in-person interactions at school led to a decrease in bullying in all of its forms. For example, a 15-year-old male public school student from Orange County stated: "Due to online school my interaction with non-Muslims has been restricted, so I rarely have time to interact with them, let alone be bullied." Notably, a 14-year-old female charter school student from Los Angeles County provided the following astute observation: "I think that even though there is still online connection, cyber bullying usually happens because of personal interactions." Similarly, a 17-year-old male public school student from Alameda County reported: "Bullying has decreased because there are less opportunities to talk in class, and of course not having transition periods or lunch breaks." In fact, when asked whether online teaching has increased or decreased the respondents' experiences of bullying, only 3.94% of respondents indicated that bullying had increased.

The significant decrease of bullying incidents during the pandemic was also reflected in instances of bystander reporting. 39.46% of students reported seeing another student being bullied for being Muslim from August 2018 to March 2020. This percentage was nearly identical to the 39.01% of students who reported seeing another student being bullied for being Muslim in CAIR-CA's 2019 report. However, from March 2020 to August 2021, only 23.13% of respondents reported seeing another student at school being bullied for being Muslim. Of the respondents who reported witnessing bullying from March 2020 to August 2021, 51.7% witnessed the bullying only on rare occasions, approximately one to two times a year.

Male and female respondents experienced bullying at almost the same rate, with males experiencing bullying at a slightly higher percentage. 46% of female respondents reported being bullied from August 2018 to March 2020. 47.46% of male respondents reported being bullied during this same time period. 25.75% of female respondents reported being bullied from March 2020 to August 2021, while 26.12% of males reported being bullied during this same time period.

## ISLAMOPHOBIA AND ANTI-MUSLIM BULLYING PREVALENT IN SCHOOLS

**F**rom 2018 to the present, Muslim students reported high levels of bullying, Islamophobia, and harassment in various aspects of their school lives, both online and off.

**FIRST, respondents reported high percentages of discomfort and feeling unsafe because of their Muslim identity and missing a considerable amount of school.**

10.23% of all respondents disagreed with the statement that they felt “safe, welcome, and respected at [their] school.” This percentage is higher than the 8.63% of respondents who disagreed with the statement in the 2019 report. Despite only 10.23% of respondents disagreeing with that statement, in response to the question “How often have you felt unsafe, unwelcome, or uncomfortable at school because of your Muslim identity,” 55.73% of respondents reported feeling unsafe, unwelcome, or uncomfortable at school. Furthermore, 19.61% of respondents reported missing school because they were unsafe, unwelcome, or

**55.73%**

**RESPONDENTS  
REPORTED  
FEELING UNSAFE,  
UNWELCOME,  
OR UNCOMFORTABLE**

uncomfortable at school – compared to only 13.76% of respondents in CAIR-CA’s 2019 Report.

**SECOND,** despite the lower reported percentages of bullying for female respondents, female students have their own unique challenges when it comes to bullying, especially for those female students who wear hijab.

**Among female respondents who wear hijab, 30.12% of them indicated that they have had their hijab tugged, pulled, or offensively touched by another student.**

**THIRD, Muslim students continue to report high levels of being victims of Islamophobic content posted by other students online.**

Despite the decrease in bullying in general during the COVID-19 pandemic, when looking at the entire reporting period of the survey (from August 2018 to August 2021) 29.72% of respondents reported that a student at school made offensive comments or posts about Islam or Muslims directly to them on social media. This is up from 12.19% of respondents in CAIR-CA’s 2019 report. Additionally, 35.68% responded that other students at their school made offensive comments about Islam or Muslims in general on social media. This reported percentage is consistent with the 34.99% of respondents in the 2019 report who represented that they had seen other students post social media posts containing offensive comments about Islam or Muslims in general. Those who reported being victims of offensive comments about Islam or Muslims online felt unsafe at school at higher rates. 25.44% of respondents who reported being victims of offensive online comments disagreed with the statement that they felt “safe, welcome, and respected at [their] school” compared to only 3.77% of respondents who had not been the victim of online bullying who disagreed with the statement.

**FOURTH, the survey results show that Islamophobic harassment and comments from teachers and other school personnel are real concerns among Muslim students in California.** 23.50% of respondents reported that a teacher, administrator, or other adult at their school made offensive comments about Islam or Muslims. 33% of the students who reported an adult at their school making offensive comments about Islam or Muslims in general reported that these incidents occurred three to six times per year or more. Similarly, 35.06% of the students who reported a teacher or administrator, or other adult making offensive comments about Islam or Muslims directly

towards them reported that these incidents occurred three to six times per year or more.

CAIR-CA often receives reports from students and their families of teachers making problematic and Islamophobic comments when discussing world events such as the anniversary of September 11, 2001 (“9/11”). This was reflected in many of the comments provided by respondents. For example, a 14-year-old female public-school student from Alameda County noted that her teacher made “offensive 9/11 references.” Another student, a 17-year-old female public-school student in Los Angeles County reported that her teacher stated Islam is a “religion of blood and war and that all we want is the end [of] all humans.” In fact, approximately one in five respondents disagreed with the statement that “When my teachers teach lessons about Islam or Muslims, they did so in a neutral, fair, and factual manner.”

Other students reported that teachers made inappropriate comments targeting the student directly. For example, a 16-year-old female public-school student from Orange County reported that a teacher implied that a student who donned the hijab, the Islamic headscarf, “was a terrorist.” Similarly, a 16-year-old female public-school student from Orange County reported that her “teacher attacked [her] in front of [her] class saying things like ‘terrorist’ and ‘you don’t belong here.’” Approximately one in five respondents who reported anti-Muslim bullying incidents to adults at their school indicated this did not help solve the issue.

**FINALLY, students who responded affirmatively to the question whether a teacher, administrator, or other adult at school made offensive comments about Islam or Muslims experienced higher percentages of discomfort at schools.** Of those who responded affirmatively to the question regarding offensive Islamophobic comments from adults, 26.12% disagreed with the statement “I feel safe, welcome, and respected at my school.” Only 5.31% of students who had not experienced an adult at their school making an offensive comment about Islam or Muslims disagreed with the statement “I feel safe, welcome, and respected at my school.” Respondents who were subjected to Islamophobic comments from adults reported a much higher rate of not feeling safe, welcome, and respected at school when compared to those who had not experienced Islamophobic comments from adults at school.

# 23.50%

## RESPONDENTS REPORTED AN ADULT AT THEIR SCHOOL MAKING OFFENSIVE COMMENTS

The students who reported that an adult made an offensive comment about Islam or Muslims also reported that 41.35% of them missed school because they felt unsafe, unwelcome, or uncomfortable at school. Only 12.93% of respondents who were not subjected to Islamophobic comments from an adult reported missing school because they felt unsafe, unwelcome, or uncomfortable at school. Moreover, students who reported an adult making an offensive comment about Islam or Muslims also disagreed with the statement, “I feel comfortable letting teachers and classmates know that I am Muslim” at 24.06%, compared to only 5.09% of respondents who did not report an adult making an offensive comment about Islam or Muslims disagreed with that statement.

Within educational settings, teachers, administrators, and other school employees owe a duty of care to students. These survey results show that denigrating treatment by educators and school adults directly contributes to Muslim students’ lack of security and comfort at school. These survey results are indicative of the power and influence school adults can exert on already vulnerable Muslim students.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

1

**Schools should conduct a thorough assessment of their school's environment as it pertains to Islamophobia and anti-Muslim bullying**



2

**Schools should implement thorough anti-bullying policies and trainings**



3

**Schools should ensure that educators are cognizant of their own biases and do not marginalize Muslim students**



4

**Standard curriculum must be anti-racist and inclusive**



Belonging to a stigmatized religious group may lead to increased feelings of rejection and discrimination.<sup>11</sup> This is especially true for Muslim students given the high levels at which they face bullying and Islamophobia. Below are CAIR-CA's recommendations for educators and families to combat Islamophobia and bullying of students who are, or are perceived as, Muslim.

## FOR EDUCATORS

**T**aken as a whole, the findings of our survey provide insight into how educators can immediately address issues of bullying as students return to in-person learning. Given that data and studies demonstrate a decrease in bullying as a result of decreased in-person interactions, educators must vigilantly address any reports of bullying by increasing supervision of the aggressor and physically separating them from the victim. Such measures can reduce the amount of unstructured and unsupervised, in-person time a bully spends with victims, such as during lunch breaks, recess, and movement between classrooms.

Furthermore, the drop in reported bullying during the pandemic suggests that the collective experience of the pandemic may have also increased school staff awareness and responsiveness to students' social-emotional wellbeing.<sup>12</sup> For example, school staff may have been more attentive to, and addressed particular forms of bullying highlighted by public media during the pandemic, such as anti-Asian bullying and harassment.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to these steps, CAIR-CA's 2021 survey data suggests that schools can take a proactive approach to create an educational environment where no forms of bullying are tolerated. Survey data shows that students who experienced bullying were more likely to witness other students being bullied and those who did not experience bullying were less likely to witness other students being bullied. Pre-pandemic, 60.81% of those who were themselves bullied reported seeing another student get bullied for being Muslim in comparison to only 21.54% of those who were not themselves bullied but still reported seeing another student get bullied for being Muslim. This data suggests that there are schools where bullying is less commonplace than others and that unchecked bullying breeds more bullying. This data also suggests that schools

can play an active role in either allowing a culture of bullying and harassment to flourish or to address it head on and stop negative behavior before it spreads.

Although the language and intent of California's current anti-bullying laws are laudable, our survey results demonstrate that it is incumbent upon school districts to first meet, and then exceed, the minimum legal requirements currently in place. Schools and school districts should take proactive steps to ameliorate the effects of bullying and harassment that occur based on actual or perceived characteristics such as religion, race, national origin, and gender. Just as bullying takes on many forms and often adapts to its surroundings, so too must bullying intervention. It is well established that taking steps to eliminate bias in the classroom can promote equity, excellence, and empowerment.<sup>14</sup> Below are four tangible steps that CAIR-CA recommends educators take:

### Schools Should Conduct A Thorough Assessment Of Their School's Environment As It Pertains To Islamophobia And Anti-Muslim Bullying

1

Schools should conduct a thorough assessment of their school's climate as it relates to bullying and harassment. During this assessment, schools should specifically look at the rates of bullying amongst Muslim students and other marginalized student populations. During the assessment, schools should also examine whether any students have experienced discrimination and harassment from school-affiliated adults.

To understand the climate and environment at a school, administrators should conduct assessments in which all members of the school's community, including teachers, students, counselors, coaches, and parents, are surveyed.<sup>15</sup> This assessment can then be used to inform additional anti-bullying measures adopted by schools.

### Schools Should Implement Thorough Anti-Bullying Policies And Trainings

2

Research indicates that anti-bullying school polices can fail to properly address bullying if the policies are not well-developed and effectively implemented.<sup>16</sup> The information collected from the school's bullying assessment should be used to implement action plans and specific policies on

# TRAINING FOR TEACHERS AND SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS SHOULD INCLUDE UNBIASED COMPETENCY TRAINING FROM EXPERTS ABOUT RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND BELIEFS

prevention and responses to incidents of bullying. Policies should clearly define what bullying and harassment are, including setting standards and thresholds for verbal bullying. Action plans should consider how to incorporate bystander involvement to prevent bullying instead of acting as passive observers. Likewise, school policies should implement procedures on how teachers should intervene in bullying incidents and ensure that teachers receive training on how to prevent bullying and harassment in their classrooms. Teachers often report that they do not have sufficient training to address such incidents.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, many schools enact policies where a single administrator is responsible for investigation and discipline of reported bullying, which results in teachers ignoring conflicts between students and viewing their responsibility as limited to reporting only. Teachers should be trained and provided the resources to properly address any incident of bullying immediately, and follow-up as needed.

The policies should also make clear that schools and districts will have zero tolerance for any incidents of Islamophobia coming from a teacher or administrator. Ensuring that an anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policy is properly implemented for both students and teachers provides a framework for a consistent schoolwide approach to bullying and harassment that supports an environment that rejects bullying culture. For anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies to be effective, schools must ensure the policies are effectively disseminated and implemented both among staff and students.

Without effective policies that are well-disseminated and implemented, students who are bullied are left to defend themselves against bullies. This unrealistic and cruel

burden can create environments where peers, teachers, and parents act as mere bystanders, contributing to a hostile environment where bullying thrives. Therefore, there is a special duty that falls on the school community to combat bullying and to advocate for students who are not empowered to do so on their own. This includes actual intervention when witnessing bullying and/or providing bullied students and their families with the proper resources to utilize advocacy networks dedicated to combatting bullying, such as CAIR-CA.

## Schools Should Ensure That Educators Are Cognizant Of Their Own Biases And Do Not Marginalize Muslim Students

Training for teachers and school administrators should include unbiased competency training from experts about the religious practices and beliefs of their Muslim students in order to allow educators to anticipate and identify areas of bullying. Teachers should be trained to be sensitive to class discussions about Islam and current global politics that may impact Muslim students and be mindful of these issues when creating lesson plans. Muslim students should not be made to feel that they individually represent the entire Muslim community, locally or globally. Many American Muslim students feel pressured by their peers and teachers to speak authoritatively on these subjects when they may not be equipped to do so, much less want to. Instead, teachers who do not have training to present on these subjects should look for professionals in their community who are qualified through resources such as WhyIslam.org and the Southern Poverty Law Center's (SPLC) Teaching Tolerance Program.



Educators can better ensure they provide an unbiased education about Islam and Muslims and improve overall student learning by re-examining their biases, approaching these topics with an open-mind, and learning how cultural interpretations impact learning outcomes. Teachers must be trained to examine their biases and be aware of how those biases might appear during their lessons. This is especially

true when discussing the anniversary of 9/11 and other world events. Districts and schools should address the Islamophobia engendered by the discussions of 9/11 through a continuous, honest reckoning with explicit and implicit biases in the classroom and the wider world. For such class discussions, educators should consider the following best practices:

## BEST PRACTICES FOR CLASS DISCUSSIONS

**1**

**Be mindful of religious diversity in the classroom and do not refer to perpetrators using language that singles out Islam and Muslims.**

**2**

**Immediately respond to any incidents of bullying or harassment that occur in the classroom during the lesson plan.**

**3**

**Do not single out and prompt Muslim students - or students perceived to be Muslim - to comment on the 9/11 attacks or other world events.**

**4**

**Avoid using language that conflates terrorism with Islam and Muslims. For example, avoid using inaccurate and inflammatory terms such as “Islamic terrorists,” “Jihadists,” or “radical Islamic terrorists.”**

**5**

**Use instructional materials - photos, videos, audio - that are not aimed at inciting emotions and instead clearly meet lesson objectives and goals.**

**6**

**Avoid stating personal beliefs about 9/11 as facts.**

**7**

**Remain sensitive to the vulnerability of students with trauma in their lives.**

**8**

**Refrain from engaging students in educational activities that stimulate the roles of perpetrators, targets, and bystanders.**

**9**

**Discuss the bigotry and hate crimes that impacted Sikh Americans, Muslim Americans, Arab Americans and other minorities in the days, months, and years after the 9/11 attacks.**



Whether an educator is aware or unaware of their biases, when an educator discusses 9/11 and other world events in a way that conflates Islam or Arabs with terrorism or inherent violence, students of Black / African, Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian (“BAMEMSA”) communities routinely report further ostracization and increased bullying, withdrawal from class participation, and psychosomatic issues. Many attempts in the past have been made by school administrators and district boards to mitigate the liabilities that school districts face because of an educator’s cultural incompetence or due to a failure to address Islamophobic bullying and other forms of bullying. By taking a proactive approach to these issues, schools and school districts can prevent them before they occur. When teachers have open discussions that do not negatively single out the Muslim community and Muslim students, the positive impact on students can be profound, as one 14-year-old private-school student from San Jose put it:

In my Global Studies Honors class, the exact opposite had happened. One of my classmates’ friend (the friend was not from our high school, and the classmate and her friend were non-Muslim) had posted something offensive on Instagram about 9/11. In class, she asked the teacher to talk about it and actually condemned her friend’s action. For 30 minutes of the class period, we talked about why it was important to stay informed on certain issues, and how we should support the Muslim community. It was the best thing I had ever experienced - in fact, I was shocked at how open people were to discuss certain issues like this, and how rather than them making fun of me, they were supporting me.

### Standard Curriculum Must Be Anti-Racist And Inclusive

4

Schools must include and implement an inclusive Ethnic

Studies curriculum for all students. Ethnic Studies is a form of culturally relevant pedagogy that speaks to the histories and experiences of historically marginalized students and their communities. Ethnic Studies courses provide relevant and meaningful curriculum that affirms students’ identities, draws from their funds of knowledge, and builds students’ critical intellectualism. Importantly, Ethnic Studies also examine the social construction and evolution of race and racism through an intersectional lens.

Studies have shown that Ethnic Studies courses have strong academic benefits and can increase attendance, GPA, and credits earned among marginalized students.<sup>18</sup> By being inclusive of the experiences, perspectives, and histories of traditionally underrepresented ethnic or racial groups, Ethnic Studies courses better engage students of color. These courses also help create school environments where students feel seen, understood, represented, respected, and welcomed. When students of color see themselves in the curriculum through Ethnic Studies courses, they have an improved sense of belonging, which in turn improves students’ mental health.<sup>19</sup>

In March 2021, the California Department of Education (CDE) passed an Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC) that can be used by schools across California to develop Ethnic Studies courses. However, schools must be aware that the ESMC is deficient and has inherent flaws. For example, the ESMC excludes Arab-Americans, including Palestinians, from the lesson plans and relegates discussions of Islamophobia to an appendix. The ESMC also privileges Eurocentric History over the stories of Black, brown, and indigenous peoples, thus diminishing the purpose of the Ethnic Studies courses and the issues that Ethnic Studies courses are intended to address.

Schools should instead reach out to organizations and experts in the field such as Liberated Ethnic Studies (<http://www.liberatedethnicstudies.org/>), an organization that has

## SCHOOLS MUST INCLUDE AND IMPLEMENT AN INCLUSIVE ETHNIC STUDIES CURRICULUM FOR ALL STUDENTS



developed an inclusive and anti-racist model curriculum for schools to use. The curriculum developed by Liberated Ethnic Studies is true to the discipline of Ethnic Studies and is inclusive of BAMEMSA communities and other marginalized groups.

## FOR PARENTS AND STUDENTS

All California students have the right to learn in an environment free of discrimination and harassment on the basis of protected categories such as religion, race, ethnicity, national origin, or gender. California's public schools have an affirmative obligation to combat these forms of bias and a responsibility to provide an equal educational opportunity.

Parents should be on the lookout for signs of bullying and harassment. Signs can include physical manifestations such as scrapes, bruises, and property stolen from their child. Other subtler changes in behavior may indicate bullying, such as a child becoming withdrawn and/or anxious, incurring excessive absences from school, or demonstrating a change in their desire to attend school.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately,

children often do not inform their parents that they have been bullied. Thus, parents must foster relationships of trust with their children to encourage honest disclosure. Parents must also understand that it is not a child's fault if they are bullied, nor should it be considered a natural part of growing up. Parents should also make sure that their children understand that they are not to blame for being bullied or harassed.

Once aware of bullying issues, parents should immediately assert their children's right to learn in a bias-free environment. If a student is being bullied, treated differently, and/or discriminated against based on a protected characteristic, their right to learn in a safe and protected environment has been violated and that student has a right to file a complaint with their school and school district.<sup>21</sup> Students, parents, or an advocate can file the complaint on the student's behalf. Additionally, schools must make readily available their anti-bullying policies and information related to the complaint process. This information should be available on the school or district's website. If a school or district fails to post its anti-bullying policies online, they are in violation of California's anti-bullying laws.<sup>22</sup>

This complaint process is called the Uniform Complaint

## WHEN A STUDENT FILES A COMPLAINT WITH THE SCHOOL AND DISTRICT, THE PRINCIPAL IS REQUIRED BY LAW TO INVESTIGATE AND FIX THE PROBLEM

Procedure (UCP) and it is codified in the California Code of Regulations.<sup>23</sup> Under the UCP, local educational agencies (LEAs) – which are primarily school districts and county offices of education – are responsible for investigating most complaints. The CDE is responsible for processing any appeals of LEA investigation results. UCP complaints should be as detailed as possible, outlining the who, what, where, when, and why regarding the incident. CAIR-CA attorneys are qualified to assist families in preparing and filing these complaints on behalf of students who have been bullied based on their religion or any related characteristic.

When a student files a complaint with the school and district, the principal is required by law to investigate and fix the problem. The school, including teachers and administrators, is required by law to protect the student and must take the necessary steps to stop any form of bullying. The district has 60 days from when they notify the complainant that the complaint has been received to investigate and respond with their intended plan of action.

If the complainant is not satisfied with the school district’s investigation or results, he or she has the right to appeal to the CDE. However, the timeline to appeal is very short and must be done within 30 calendar days of receiving the school district’s written response.

Litigation is another powerful tool to promote educational equity. In extreme circumstances where the CDE fails to act in the student’s interest and enforce remedies that the school districts must undertake, students and parents may consider taking their cases to court and litigating bullying claims under state and federal laws. Litigation in court can be used by bullying victims and their families to seek justice and effect systemic changes within school districts through injunctive relief and damages awards.

Parents should use the stated procedures to make complaints, then follow up to ensure a response from the school. Parents should also report all instances of bullying and discriminatory harassment to their local CAIR-CA office.





## WHAT CAIR-CA DOES

Over the past two decades, CAIR-CA has led the advocacy effort to combat Islamophobia in schools across the state. CAIR-CA has focused a substantial number of resources and advocacy efforts on legislative action to force schools and school districts to address, prevent, and remedy bullying. Specifically, the results of CAIR-CA's direct legal services, research, surveys, and publication of our anti-bullying reports have helped convince state legislators to take a stand against bullying. Additionally, CAIR-CA has substantially contributed to advocacy efforts through our annual Muslim Day at the Capitol (MDAC). Although the most recent MDAC in 2021 was virtual due to the Covid-19 pandemic, MDAC usually gathers hundreds of Muslim community members from across the state in Sacramento and to play a critical role in shaping policies that impact California's Muslims. Participants speak to Assembly members and state senators about proposed legislation impacting the participants and the greater Muslim community.

Upon request, CAIR-CA also provides cultural competency training to schools and works with students, parents, and school administrators to deal with issues relating to Muslim students. Additionally, CAIR-CA conducts focus groups, listening sessions, and community surveys to understand the problems American Muslim students face in schools. Parents and students should reach out to CAIR-CA if the student is experiencing bullying or discrimination at school. If a situation so requires, CAIR-CA offers free legal services for those experiencing civil

rights violations, which includes discrimination at school and bullying. CAIR-CA also provides free educational workshops to the American Muslim community to train parents and children on how to address and prevent bullying at their schools and to educate them about the protections available to them under state and federal laws.

CAIR-CA also launched an annual educational campaign to encourage educators to use lesson plans on the anniversary of 9/11 to solemnly promote diversity, inclusivity, and mutual understanding in the classroom without furthering the marginalization of Muslim students. In a letter addressed to educators, CAIR-CA recommended that school administrators, district boards, and educational non-profits address the Islamophobia engendered by the events of 9/11 through a continuous, honest reckoning with explicit and implicit biases in the wider world that manifests within classrooms, from peers, teachers, and administrators alike. This letter reflects many of the recommendations we provided above.

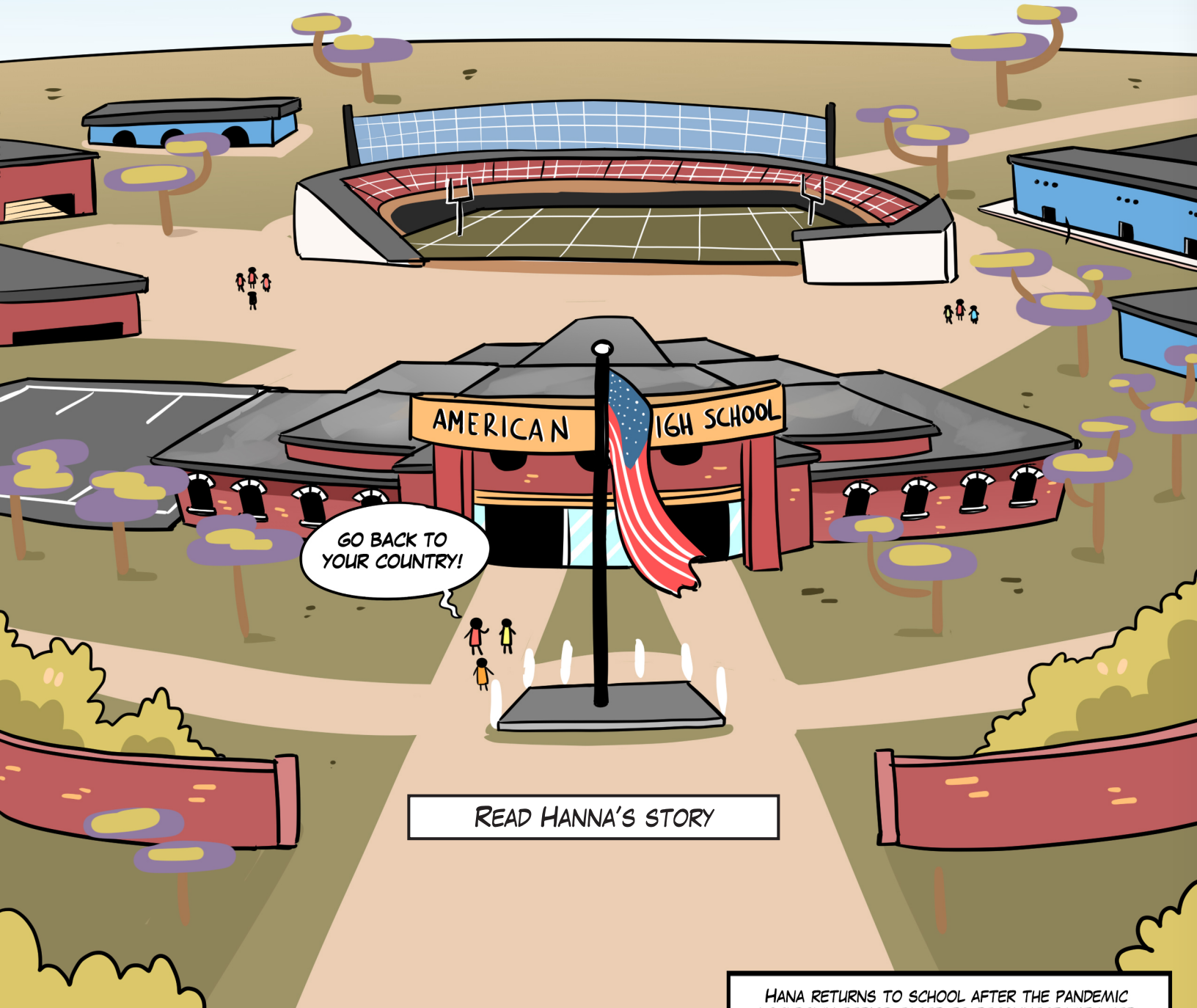
CAIR-CA also provides direct services to students who have been victims of religious, ethnic, racial, and national origin-based bullying. CAIR-CA interacts with and assists families who have concerns about peer-to-peer bullying, biased treatment by educators and administrators, Islamophobic content in curricula, and provision of religious accommodations for Muslim students. Since 2018, CAIR-CA has responded to 133 cases related to K-12 bullying, school denial of religious accommodations, and educational administrative concerns brought by Muslim families.

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# “GO BACK TO YOUR COUNTRY!”

EXAMINING ISLAMOPHOBIA IN CALIFORNIA SCHOOLS



GO BACK TO YOUR COUNTRY!

READ HANNA'S STORY

BULLYING IS PREVALENT ON SCHOOL GROUNDS. IT CREATES A CULTURE OF TRAUMA THAT DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECTS STUDENTS OF COLOR.

SCHOOLS CAN PUT AN END TO BULLYING BY TAKING PROACTIVE STEPS TO CREATE A SAFE AND INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR ALL.

A GRAPHIC NOVEL ON BULLYING  
ACCOMPANYING CAIR-CA'S 2021 BULLYING REPORT

HANA RETURNS TO SCHOOL AFTER THE PANDEMIC LOCKDOWN PERIOD EAGER TO RECONNECT WITH HER FRIENDS. BUT SOON FACES INTENSE BULLYING FROM HER PEERS WHEN THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM COVERS THE GLOBAL IMPACT OF 9/11.

WHAT FOLLOWS IS A KIND OF ISLAMOPHOBIC BULLYING THAT DEEPLY IMPACTS HANA AND STUDENTS LIKE HER.

WILL HANA AND HER FAMILY FIND THE HELP THEY NEED TO CREATE A HEALTHIER ENVIRONMENT FOR HANA AND HER PEERS?



**CAIR**  
CALIFORNIA

## OUR MISSION


To enhance understanding of Islam, protect civil liberties, promote justice, and empower American Muslims.

## OUR VISION

To be a leading advocate for justice and mutual understanding.

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