An Educator's Guide to Islamic Religious Practices

CAIR CONNECTICUT

About CAIR

The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), America's largest Islamic civil liberties and advocacy group, has over 25 offices and chapters nationwide. Its mission is to enhance the understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American Muslims, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding. The demand for our services has grown tremendously. From restrictions placed on Muslims to practice their religion, to profiling and discrimination stemming from a lack of understanding of Islam, the need for CAIR in Connecticut is great. CAIR-CT strives to ensure that Muslims in Connecticut enjoy the same protections that all Americans have.

Protecting the rights of Connecticut Muslims is at the core of CAIR-CT's mission. We work vigorously to educate on behalf of community members experiencing discrimination and remedy cases through in-person negotiations, from filing charges of discrimination, letter writing, and referrals to our attorney referral network. Cases range from employment, public accommodation and school discrimination, to hate crimes and governmental religious/racial profiling.

CAIR-CT actively engages with the media to ensure that a fair and accurate portrayal of Islam and Muslims is presented to the American public. This is accomplished through media appearances, press conferences, opinion editorials, and letters to the editor. In addition, CAIR-CT provides training to community members, law enforcement, government agencies, corporations, businesses, employers, media professionals, educators, university students, medical professionals, religious leaders, political leaders, and others. Professionals of all fields are engaged in discussions about working with the Muslim community, with the purpose of helping to create an environment where there is fair, welcoming, and just treatment of Muslims.

Disclaimer: The materials contained herein are not intended to and do not constitute legal advice. Readers should not act on the information provided without seeking professional legal counsel. Neither the transmission nor receipt of these materials creates an attorney-client relationship between the author and the receiver. 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.

Glossary of Islamic Terms

- **Allah**: "God" in Arabic
- **Eid**: Two major religious celebrations, Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, commemorating important events in the Muslim year
- **Halal**: Commonly understood to mean "permissible", signals whats is acceptable in Islamic practice (i.e. halal food, dress, etc.)
- **Hijab**: "Barrier" or "partition", often used to refer to the headscarf worn by some Muslim women
- **Islam**: The proper name for the religion of Muslims
- **Jummah**: Friday prayer, required for those who are able to attend
- **Kufi**: A cap worn by some Muslim men
- **Masjid**: "Mosque" in Arabic, the Muslim house of worship
- **Muslim**: Follower of Islam
- **Prophet**: An individual believed to be chosen by God to deliver two messages 1) God alone should be worshipped and 2) people should strive to live ethically by treating others as they wish to be treated
- **Qur'an**: The Holy Book of Islam, believed to be the word of God
- **Ramadan**: The lunar month in which Muslims are required to fast from dawn to dusk, and be especially mindful of other sins
- **Sharia or Shari'ah**: A living system of Islamic legal principles and ethical standards, which extends to one's relationship with one's neighbors, the state, God, and one's conscious
- **Wudu**: Ritual washing required before prayer, requires running water in order to cleanse hands, feet, and face

Five Common Misconceptions About Islam:

All or most Muslims are from the Middle East.

Globally, only one in five Muslims is from the Middle East. The largest Muslim populations are in Africa and Asia. In the U.S., more than 60 percent of American Muslims are immigrants, with 70 percent of this population being U.S. citizens. American Muslims are as ethnically and racially diverse as the American population, with 28 percent of American Muslims identifying as Asian, 20 percent as Black, and 8 percent as Hispanic.

"Allahu Akbar" indicates imminent danger.

"Allahu Akbar" translates to "God is the greatest" and is used as a celebration of life — such as a birth — to indicate gratitude, and to celebrate God's greatness.

"Jihad" refers to violence committed in the name of Islam.

"Jihad means "to struggle" and alludes to the struggle, individual or communal, to become closer to God through overcoming adversity and striving to be one's best self. There are two types of jihad, internal, which is the struggle to become a better person, and external, which is the struggle to make the world a better place.

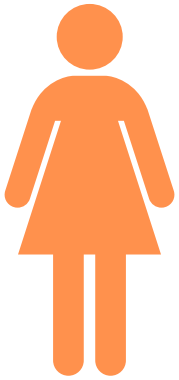
Muslims are particularly prone to violence and/or to support terrorism.

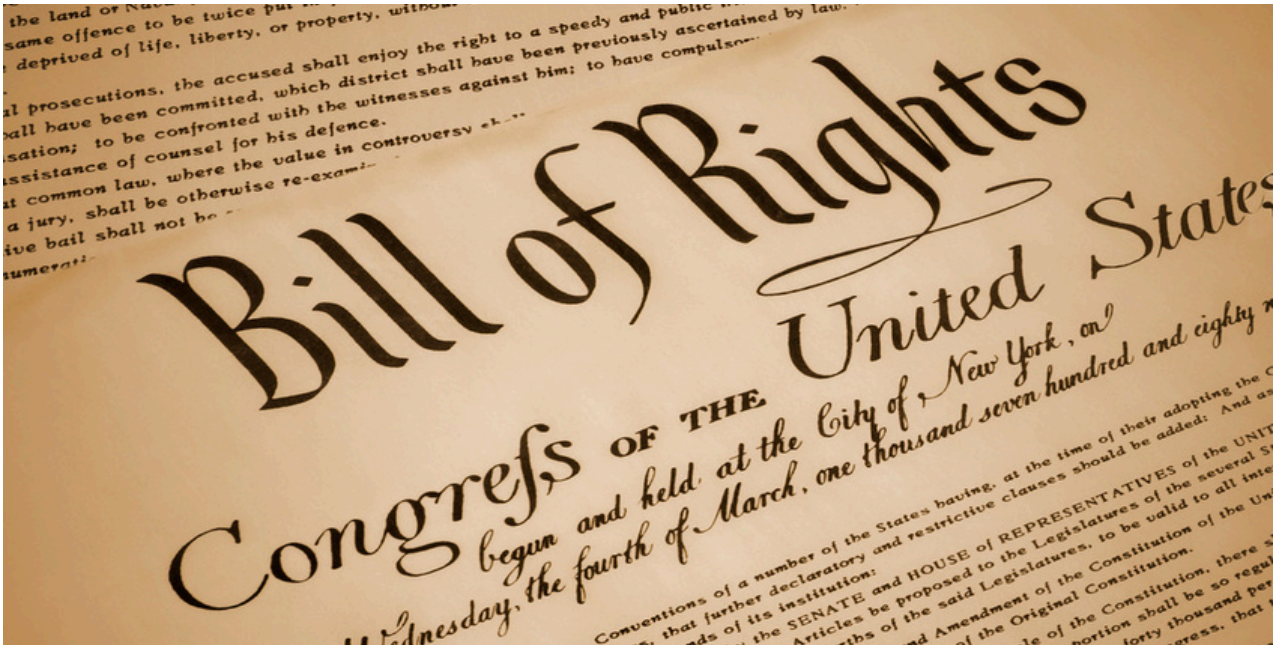
According to a recent poll, 41 percent of Americans believe Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence among its followers. This belief is unsubstantiated by data, as the vast majority of Muslims around the world are peaceful individuals who suffer from violence and terrorism more than non-Muslims.

Moreover, numerous reports have confirmed that, in the U.S., white, right-wing, non-Muslim terrorists pose a greater danger than radical Islamists, both in number of attacks and deadlines of attacks. Muslim scholars have long defined Islam as a religion of peace and the killing of innocent people or civilians is one of the greatest sins an individual can commit under Islam.

Islam oppresses women.

Most oppression of women that receives attention as being perpetrated by Muslims is not related to their adherence to Islam, but rather tied to local customs and traditions. Muslim women have held high leadership positions in Muslim majority countries including president and prime minister. Islam forbids violence of any kind towards women and promotes care for widows, orphans, and the poor. Finally, the Quran supports the equal status of men and women, by stating that "women have rights over men, similar to those of men over women." - Quran 2:228





Legal Framework

Federal and state laws provide protection for students, including mandating religious accomodations where necessary and protecting students from bullying. Educators should be fully aware of the laws and their implications.

United States Constitution

First Amendment to the Constitution establishes freedom of religious practice and the separation of church and state in order to guarantee this freedom.

Implications:

- State actors, including teachers and school administrators, cannot encourage or promote religious or anti-religious activity such as school sponsored prayer.
- Any teaching about religion must be done objectively and cannot advance or inhibit any religion.
- Religions should be taught in similar manners with similar resources committed to lesson plans. Protects the right to be Muslim and maintain religious practices in school such as clothing choices and prayer.

Federal Laws

Title IV of the Civil Rights Act (42 U.S.C. §2000 et seq.) (1964): prohibits discrimination based on religion in public primary and secondary schools, as well as in public colleges and universities.

Implications:

- A school must take immediate and appropriate action to investigate or otherwise determine the extent of any student-on-student harassment the school knows of or reasonably should know of.

- If harassment occurred, a school must take prompt and effective steps reasonably calculated to end the harassment, eliminate any hostile environment and prevent its recurrence.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act (42 U.S.C. § 2000 et seq.): Prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, and national origin in programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance.

Implications:
- Although religion is not specifically enumerated, this statute applies to anti-Muslim harassment as it is often based on shared ancestry of ethnic characteristics.
- Schools that fail to follow federal anti-discrimination policies are at risk of forfeiting their federal funding.

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (20 U.S.C. § 6301 et seq.) (1965): Conditions school districts' funding on written certification that it does not have any policies that prevent or deny participation in constitutionally protected prayer.

Implications:
- Protects the right of students to meet and pray together during the school day and on school grounds.
- Guarantees the right of students of all faiths to have a similar platform for their religious expression.

Examples of actions that may violate federal law:
- A teacher harassing a student because of the student's faith, or a school's deliberate indifference and/or failure to respond, to pervasive faith-based harassment from other students.
- Suppression of students' religious exercise, such as the denial of a group of Muslim students' request for space to perform midday prayers during lunch period.
- Refusal of a student's request to wear hijab (a religious headscarf) at school; or enforcement of a schools uniform policy which requires Muslim students to remove their hijabs.
- Penalizing a student for missing school due to the observance of a religious holiday.

Equal Access Act (20 U.S.C. § 4071 et seq.) (1984): affirms the right of student-initiated religious activities in public schools.

Implications:
- Religious clubs must be allowed and afforded the same access to resources, i.e. space, as other student-run, non-curricular clubs.

Connecticut Law

Connecticut Public Act 11-232 (Conn. Gen. Stat. § 10-222ii) requires that all local and regional school districts develop and implement Safe School Climate Plans to prevent and address bullying, harassment, and intimidation. The statute prohibits student bullying based on characteristics including race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, socioeconomic status, academic status, or physical appearance. These protections are explicitly recognized as part of civil rights safeguards within the educational environment.

Connecticut General Statutes § 10-15c: ensures that Connecticut's public schools are open to all children aged five and older and guarantees every student equal access to participation in educational activities—including courses of study—without discrimination based on race, color, sex, gender identity or expression, religion, national origin, or sexual orientation. (GLAD Law, CT.gov)

Implications:

- Guarantees that all students in Connecticut, beginning at age five, have the right to attend public schools and participate in educational programs free from bullying, harassment, and discrimination.
- Protections against bullying and harassment are explicitly recognized as civil rights, with legal consequences for schools or districts that fail to uphold them.
- Students are protected based on race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, socioeconomic or academic status, and physical appearance.
- School districts must develop and implement Safe School Climate Plans to prevent and address bullying and harassment, and may be held accountable if they fail to protect students' rights.
- Schools are required to proactively prevent bullying and discrimination, not merely respond after incidents occur.

***Compliance Tip #1*:** Recognize **harassment** – look for harassing conduct, motivated by a protected characteristic (including sex, color, race, religion, national origin), that creates a hostile school environment.

To state a hostile school environment claim under the Under Connecticut law, a student may raise a hostile school environment claim by showing: (1) bullying or harassment—through repeated written, oral, electronic acts, or physical gestures—based on a protected characteristic such as race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic or academic status, physical appearance, or association; (2) that the conduct was severe, persistent, or pervasive enough to cause harm, create fear, substantially disrupt the education process, infringe on rights, or establish a hostile school environment; and (3) that the school district failed to reasonably address the behavior, despite its duty to enforce a Safe School Climate Plan and take prompt action.

Connecticut law (Conn. Gen. Stat. § 10-222ii): Requires that local and regional boards of education implement and enforce a policy of zero tolerance for discrimination, harassment, and retaliation in schools. Each district must adopt rules, procedures, and safeguards to ensure that no student is subjected to unequal treatment or denied participation in educational programs or activities on the basis of race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, socioeconomic status, disability, or other protected characteristics. The law further requires school districts to establish a formal process for reporting, investigating, and remedying incidents of discrimination or harassment, with appropriate confidentiality, protections against retaliation, and accountability measures for staff and administrators.

Connecticut law (Conn. Gen. Stat. § 10-222ii) requires each local and regional board of education to adopt, publicize, and enforce a policy of nondiscrimination and safe school climate. The policy must:

- Apply to all forms of discrimination, harassment, or retaliation occurring on school grounds, at school-sponsored activities, on school transportation, and in certain circumstances off-campus when they impact the school environment.
- Require school employees to take immediate and appropriate action if they witness or receive reports of discriminatory or harassing conduct;
- Establish a formal procedure for reporting, documenting, and investigating complaints of discrimination or retaliation;
- Include timelines to ensure prompt, fair, and thorough investigation and resolution of complaints;
- Provide an appeal mechanism for students, parents, or guardians who are dissatisfied with the outcome;
- Safeguard the confidentiality of complainants, as appropriate, and prohibit retaliation against individuals who report or participate in investigations;
- Designate staff responsible for coordinating compliance with nondiscrimination and safe school climate obligations, including oversight of prevention, training, and enforcement measures.

Implications:

School Districts policies must contain:

- A clear statement outlining how the nondiscrimination and safe school climate policy will be publicized and communicated to students, staff, parents, and the wider school community;
- A requirement that the full policy be prominently posted on the district's website and distributed annually to all parents, guardians, and students;
- Inclusion of the policy in student handbooks and any official district publications that detail rules, procedures, or standards of conduct;
- Ongoing measures to ensure that all students, staff, and families understand their rights, responsibilities, and the procedures for reporting and addressing discrimination, harassment, or retaliation.

Compliance Tip #2:

- The Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), with the CHRO, provides guidance and resources to help parents, students, and school districts address and resolve bullying, harassment, and intimidation complaints.

- Resources include statutory requirements, investigation procedures, intervention strategies, model policies, and additional tools, available at: CSDE Bullying Resources.

Islamic Religious Practices

Schools and educators should be aware of, and responsive to, certain accommodations whichMuslimstudents may require in order to practice their faith.

Daily Prayer:

Islam prescribes that believers perform prayer five times each day: dawn, noon, afternoon, dusk, and nighttime. The noon and afternoon prayers may regularly fall within school hours. Prayer requires a ritual washing, or wudhu, beforehand. During the act of praying, Muslims recite the prayer either aloud or in silence and stand, bow, and touch their foreheads to the ground, while facing the Kabaa in Mecca. During prayer the worshipper is fully engaged and should not be interrupted.

In Islam, congregational worship is on a Friday, with mosques holding midday prayer and sermon called Jum'ah, which lasts approximately an hour.

Wudhu

- Before each prayer, Muslims are required to wash their faces, hands and feet with clean water.
- This washing is normally performed in a restroom sink or other facility that has running water, and takes about two minutes.

Prayer

- Allow Muslim students topray in unused rooms.
- Provide them with privacyand space, as well as a clean place to perform ritual washing.

Ramadan and Fasting:

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic Lunar calendar, during which most Muslims observe religious fasting. Fasting includes refraining from eating, drinking, smoking, and intimate contact from dawn to sunset. Ramadan is also a period when Muslims increase their focus on personal restraint, proper conduct, and empathy with the less fortunate through giving to charity and engagement in local projects. Although Muslims are not required to fast until the age of puberty, many choose to participate at a younger age.

Educators should consider celebrating diversity by allowing a student or guest speaker to explain the traditions and practices of Ramadan. This will provide an important learning opportunity and allow Muslim students to feel comfortable in fasting while at school.

Educators can show sensitivity to fasting students by:

- Excusing them from strenuous physical activity.
- Allowing them to spend lunchtime someplace where others are not eating.

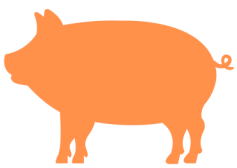
Dietary Requirements:

Muslims refrain from consuming alcohol, pork, and any pork by-products or derivatives. Some Muslims choose to adhere to "Halal" standards for meat and poultry slaughter and preparation.

Schools should indicate, with a clear, age-appropriate market, if a food item contains any of the following objectional products or ingredients:

- Pork, including: Pepperoni, sausage, hot dogs, or bacon
- Animal shortening gelatin, including: Jello and gummy bears/worms Lard,
- Ingredients containing alcohol such as vanilla extract and dijon mustard

Schools with a high number of Muslim Students should consider the demand for halal food and offer it alongside other options such as kosher and vegan.



Pork and Pork By-Products in Lunches

- Mark items with a red dot or a picture of a pig.
- Provide alternate lunch options, such as vegetarian meals and snacks.

Personal Modesty:

Muslims believe that an emphasis on modesty encourages society to value individuals for their wisdom, skills, and contribution to the community, rather than physical attractiveness. Individuals interpret what this means for themselves differently, according to cultural, ethical, regional, and personal interpretations of modesty.

Men and boys may choose to wear clothing that covers from the navel to the knee. Some choose to wear a small head covering, or maintain a beard to follow the example of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Muslim women often choose to wear loose-fitting and non-revealing clothing in public. Additionally, some choose to wear a hijab or other head covering and some may wear a face veil, commonly referred to as a niqab. Some individuals may choose to cover their body at all times, even in same-gender locker rooms.

Schools should help students maintain their personal interpretation of modesty by:

- Ensuring that students are not mocked or teased for their clothing choices.
- Allowing alternate clothing for physical education.
- Allowing private dressing and shower areas upon request.
- Being sensitive to the fact that female students who choose to wear the hijab commonly experience issues with other students, with one in three reporting having their hijab tugged, pulled, or otherwise offensively touched, and creating an environment where such conduct is unquestionably unacceptable.

Physical Education

- Discuss clothing requirement with Muslim parents.
- School administrators should consider alternative uniforms for physical education classes.
- A private shower should be made available, or the Muslim student should be permitted to wear some type of covering in the shower, such as a swimsuit.
- Reschedule classes for students preferring same gender exercise environment.
- Provide students with alternate activities if they cannot participate.
- No student should be pressured to participate or penalized for not taking part in such activities.

Gender Relations

- Do not extend hand first for handshakes with members of different genders. Avoid touching when comforting
- students and parents of different genders. Respect students' boundaries and allow them to choose whether
- they wish to hug or hold hands with members of different genders.

Adolescence and Gender Relations:

Puberty is a major life turning point of all students. Islam seeks to maintain modesty through offering guidance on what is acceptable for members of the opposite sex after puberty. Islamic guidelines suggest that physical contact and being alone together should be discouraged between unmarried males and females. Educators should not be offended if a Muslim student is reluctant to shake hands or avoids eye contact with members of the opposite sex. Further, Muslim students should not be forced to participate in certain coed activities such as physical education or school dances.

Schools should ensure Muslim students can maintain gender relations they are comfortable with by ensuring that students are not penalized or deemed disrespectful for maintaining a distance from members of the opposite sex, including allowing students alternatives to coed activities.

Religious Celebrations:

There are several days in the Muslim calendar with special religious significance, but the major celebrations are the two Eid days. The first Eid day, Eid al-Fitr, is celebrated at the end of the holy month of Ramadan. Eid al-Adha, is celebrated on the tenth day of the twelfth

Islamic month during the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). Typical festives include congregational prayer, gatherings with family and friends, and gifts and entertainment, especially for children. Schools with a significant number of Muslim students should consider giving Eid similar recognition as that given to Christmas and Hanukkah.

School should not penalize students for choosing to refrain from participating in school functions or social gatherings that celebrate religious holidays of other faiths.

Schools should accommodate these celebrations by:

- Ensuring students are not penalized for missing school to celebrate these holidays.
- Placing these holidays on school calendars so students and teachers are aware.
- Avoiding scheduling major events on these days.

Pronunciation Guide:
Eid al-Fitr: EED ull-FITTr
Eid al-Adha:EEDull-AHD-ha
Eid Mubarak: EED moo-BAR-ak

Curriculum Issues:

Although availability of accurate and balanced instructional material is increasing, the continued use of outdated material in social studies and world history classes reinforces perceptions of Islam as a foreign creed and Muslims as enemies. Such divisiveness can contribute to incidents of anti-Muslim bullying, harassment, and violence.

- Schools should have their materials reviewed for bias by qualified Muslim educators. Contact CAIR-CT office to learn more about our new "Muslim Studies Curriculum. Encourage class discussion that embraces diversity, tolerance, and an inclusive
- classroom environment.

Family Life/Sex Education:

Islam puts great emphasis on modesty, chastity, morality, and there is a specific set of teachings with regard to human development and related issues. Connecticut allows parents or guardians to remove their children from any part of the health, family life, or sex education classes if it conflicts with their beliefs. This is referred to as an "opt-out" policy. (SEICUS)

Family Life/Sex Education Program

- Allow parents reasonable time to review any material pertaining to/with respect to sex education.
- Allow children to opt-out from all or part of the family life program.

Pledge of Allegiance:

While Islam prescribes respect for country and local laws, it also discourages acts of reverence to anyone or anything but God. Some Muslims may choose to opt out of reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. This should not be interpreted as a sign of disrespect, or lack of patriotism. Educators should respect the decision of Muslim and other students not to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, in accordance with their First Amendment rights.

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