



## FACT SHEET: Protecting Students from Discrimination Based on Shared Ancestry or Ethnic Characteristics

The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) enforces Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which protects all students from discrimination based on race, color, or national origin in any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance from the Department. This fact sheet describes ways this protection covers students who are or are perceived to be Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist, or of another religious group.

### Title VI's protection from discrimination:

**1** Title VI's protection from race, color, or national origin discrimination extends to students who experience discrimination, including harassment, based on their actual or perceived: (i) shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics; or (ii) citizenship or residency in a country with a dominant religion or distinct religious identity. For more information, please see OCR's 2017 [Know Your Rights: Title VI and Religion fact sheet](#).

**2** Title VI prohibits discrimination based on race, color, or national origin against students of any religion, such as students who are Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, or Buddhist, when the discrimination, for example, involves:

- racial, ethnic, or ancestral slurs or stereotypes;
- how a student looks, including skin color, physical features, or style of dress that reflects both ethnic and religious traditions; and
- a foreign accent; a foreign name, including names commonly associated with particular shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics; or speaking a foreign language.

**3** Because Title VI does not protect students from discrimination based only on religion, such as a school's denial of a student's request to miss class for a religious holiday, OCR refers complaints of discrimination based exclusively on religion to the [U.S. Department of Justice \(DOJ\)](#), which has jurisdiction on this issue.



## Examples of the kinds of incidents that could, depending upon facts and circumstances, raise Title VI concerns include:

- A Jewish middle school student reports to a teacher that the student feels unsafe at school because classmates routinely place notes with swastikas on the student's backpack, perform Nazi salutes, and make jokes about the Holocaust. The teacher advises the student to "just ignore it" and takes no steps to address the harassment.
- Students report concerns about comments made by classmates during history and cultural lessons related to Sikhism, Islam, and other traditions prevalent in South Asia. Muslim students describe, for example, being told by peers in class that "you started 911" and being called "terrorist." The school is alleged to have not taken effective action to address these reports.
- Sikh students who wear a turban (head covering) are repeatedly called "turban" and other names at school, and a student tries to physically remove a turban that a Sikh student is wearing. Students report that the district does not take effective actions to document and address these reports.

## What can a person do if a student experiences discrimination based on shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics?

Anyone who believes that a school has discriminated against a student based on race, color, or national origin can file a complaint of discrimination with OCR within 180 days of the alleged discrimination. To file a complaint, visit <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/complaintintro.html>.

## Additional Resources

**More information** is available on OCR's Title VI Discrimination Based on Shared Ancestry or Ethnic Characteristics webpage, available at [www.ed.gov/ocr/sharedancestry.html](http://www.ed.gov/ocr/sharedancestry.html). If you have any questions or would like technical assistance, please contact the OCR office serving the State or territory where the alleged discriminatory conduct occurred by visiting <https://ocrcas.ed.gov/contact-ocr>. You may also contact us at (800) 421-3481 or at [ocr@ed.gov](mailto:ocr@ed.gov).

For free language access services or resources, which may include oral technical assistance or written translation of a publicly available OCR document, contact us at 1-800-421-3481 (TDD: 1-800-877-8339) or email us at [ocr@ed.gov](mailto:ocr@ed.gov). For more information about the Department's interpretation or translation services, please call 1-800-USA-LEARN (1-800-872-5327) (TTY: 1-800-437-0833) or email [Ed.Language.Assistance@ed.gov](mailto:Ed.Language.Assistance@ed.gov). To request documents in alternate formats such as Braille or large print, please contact the Department at 202-260-0852 or [om\\_eeos@ed.gov](mailto:om_eeos@ed.gov).

*Please note that this resource does not have the force and effect of law. OCR's enforcement of Title VI stems from Title VI and its implementing regulations.*