



U.S. Department of Education
Office for Civil Rights

Know Your Rights: Title VI and Religion

The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) enforces federal civil rights laws that prohibit schools, colleges, and universities from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, sex, disability, or age. These laws protect students who are or are perceived to be members of a religious group, such as Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and Sikhs, from discrimination on any of the bases described above.

What types of discrimination are covered by Title VI?

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects students from race, color, and national origin discrimination. This prohibition encompasses discrimination, including harassment, based on a student's actual or perceived:

- (1) shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics, or
- (2) citizenship or residency in a country with a dominant religion or distinct religious identity.

Title VI does not protect students from religious discrimination. Other federal civil rights laws, however, which are enforced by other federal agencies, do prohibit religious discrimination in schools, colleges, and universities.

Title VI prohibits discrimination against students of any religion when the discrimination involves:

- racial, ethnic, or ancestral epithets, or slurs
- potentially or allegedly inherited traits
- how a person or group looks, dresses, or speaks if linked to ethnicity or ancestry (e.g., skin color, facial features, attire, accent, language spoken)
- stereotypes about people who share certain ancestral or ethnic characteristics

OCR published several additional documents in [2004](#), [2010](#), [2016](#), and [2017](#) with illustrative examples of discrimination, including harassment, to assist members of the public in understanding OCR's Title VI jurisdiction with regard to Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh students, among others, which are available at www.ed.gov/ocr/sharedancestry.html.

When does harassment violate Title VI?

A school, college, or university violates Title VI when:

- (1) harassing conduct on the basis of race, color, or national origin is sufficiently serious as to limit or deny a student's ability to participate in or benefit from the educational program, i.e., creates a hostile environment;
- (2) a responsible employee of the school knew, or should have known, about the harassment; and
- (3) the school failed to take prompt and effective steps reasonably calculated to end the harassment, eliminate the hostile environment, prevent the harassment from recurring, and, as appropriate, remedy its effects.

Anyone with information about discrimination occurring in schools may file a complaint by contacting:

U.S. Dept. of Education, Office for Civil Rights

Email: ocr@ed.gov

Telephone: 202-453-6100 or 800-421-3481

TDD: 800-877-8339

Language Assistance: 800-USA-LEARN (800-872-5327)

OCR also offers technical assistance to the public and will respond to inquiries about schools' obligations and the rights of students and parents under the laws that OCR enforces.

For more information about the laws that OCR enforces, including those prohibiting discrimination based on disability and sex, please visit us at www.ed.gov/ocr.

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