

Massachusetts Muslims, Know Your Rights! Your child's rights at school

- *A classmate pulls off a Muslim girl's hijab in the lunchroom.*
- *A teacher tells your son's class that Islam requires the oppression of women.*
- *School officials will not let Muslim students take prayer breaks.*
- *A staff member asks about your family's political views.*
- *A coach penalizes a Muslim student athlete for fasting during Ramadan.*

The information below concerns Massachusetts public school students from kindergarten through high school.¹ For Massachusetts college students, please see our flyer, [Know Your Rights as a Muslim College Student](#).

Bullying. All schools must have a bullying policy that applies to both students and staff. If your child is being bullied, the school must investigate, take action against the aggressor, and also take steps to keep your child safe. For more detailed information, please see our flyer, [Know Your Rights: Bullying at School](#).

Discipline. Schools have the right to discipline students for violating the school's rules. This helpful [guide](#)² explains the disciplinary process and your rights. However, a school cannot discipline your child more harshly than other students who violated the same rules, based on your family's religion, race, national origin, or your child's political viewpoint.

Lessons & classroom materials.

Sex education – In Massachusetts, public schools must notify parents about classes or presentations on “human sexual education or human sexuality issues” and allow parents to review the materials in advance. If you wish, you can tell the school to excuse your child from those lessons. Parents should discuss with the school alternative activities for their child while excused from the class or activity, to put that time to good use.

Other lessons or books – Other than sex education, students do not have the right to be excused from lessons about topics you may find offensive based on your religious beliefs, unless your child is forced to agree with the offensive beliefs. But parents can still ask, to see what the school says. In addition, if a lesson gives false or misleading information about Islam, CAIR-MA can help you educate your child's teachers about Islam.

Pledge of Allegiance. Teachers may lead the class in the Pledge of Allegiance, but students have the right not to participate, or even to stand for the pledge.

¹ This flyer focuses on discrimination based on religion, race, and national origin. However, it is also illegal to for a Massachusetts public school to discriminate against a student on the basis of gender, disability, or age. In addition, this flyer does not address special education laws, a complex area of law that CAIR-MA does not handle.

² Created by the Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law & Justice, <https://massappleseed.org/>.

Religious holidays. Students must be excused from classes or exams on religious holidays. Check the school’s rules about how and when to give notice that your child will not be in class. Students must also be allowed to make up the work they missed.

Requesting changes to a school’s policies – religious accommodations. In Massachusetts, there is no clear answer as to when a school must allow your child to do something outside of its usual policies. But you can certainly ask the school to change the rules for your child and see what can be worked out. Many schools are willing to help.

- *Dress codes & athletic wear* – Generally, your child can wear Islamic clothing, such as a hijab or kufi, to a public school. If your child is not comfortable with the uniform that is required for gym class or for sports, ask if they can wear more modest clothing.
- *Prayer* – Many schools allow their Muslim students to take a short prayer break. Ask the school if your child can use an empty classroom or other clean and quiet space.
- *Jummah* – Ask if you can pick up your child on Fridays for Jummah, and then bring them back, if classes are still in session afterwards.
- *Ramadan* – You can ask the school to help meet your child’s needs during Ramadan, whether or not your child is fasting. We will post materials for Ramadan 2024 in early 2024.

When you cannot resolve the problem – filing a complaint. If a school does not take proper action in response to your concerns or requests, then parents can file a discrimination complaint against the school with either the state or federal government.

*Please call CAIR-MA before filing a complaint.
We may be able to represent you. And even if we can’t, we may be able to help you write your complaint so that you present a strong case.*

- *Mass. Attorney General’s Civil Rights Division* – There is no cost and you can file a complaint [online](#).³
- *U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR)* – This complaint process is also free and can be done [online](#). NOTE: an OCR complaint must be filed within 180 days of the last discriminatory act. If you use a school’s internal complaint process, then you must file within 60 days after that process is completed.

Withdrawing your child from the public schools – homeschooling. Massachusetts parents have the right to homeschool their children. But you must get permission from your local school district before removing your child from school. Learn more about homeschooling [here](#).

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³ Even though education is not mentioned in the list of topics shown, the Attorney General’s office handles education discrimination cases. In addition, the online [complaint form](#) is called a “consumer complaint” but it covers many issues. Check the box for “discrimination or civil rights.”