



State of New Jersey

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Acting Commissioner

September 13, 2006

TO: Chief School Administrators
Charter School Lead Persons
Principals

FROM: Lucille E. Davy
Acting Commissioner

SUBJECT: Bullying and Harassment of Ethnic Groups

As we begin yet another school year, filled with the expectation of success for all students, I want to reinforce New Jersey's commitment to a safe environment, conducive to learning. Increased diversity in New Jersey requires greater understanding of the myriad cultures present in our state in order to learn and work respectfully across cultures. Solving new national and state human security challenges requires the expertise and understanding to address complex problems that threaten the well-being of people of all cultures.

Let me remind you that legislation (*N.J.S.A. 18A:37-13 et seq.*) enacted on September 6, 2002, required each school district to adopt a policy prohibiting harassment, intimidation, and bullying on school property, at school-sponsored functions, and on school buses. On August 3, 2005, the New Jersey State Board of Education adopted regulations on intimidation, harassment and bullying at *N.J.A.C. 6A:16-7.9*. A safe and civil environment in school is necessary for students to learn and achieve high academic standards. Harassment, intimidation, or bullying, like other disruptive or violent behaviors, is conduct that disrupts both a student's ability to learn and a school's ability to educate its students in a safe environment. Since students learn by example, school administrators, faculty, staff, and volunteers should be commended for demonstrating appropriate behavior, treating others with civility and respect, and refusing to tolerate harassment, intimidation, or bullying.

The September 11 attacks, occurring five years ago but still fresh in our minds, continue to trigger incidents of bullying, harassment, and violence directed at specific groups of students based on dress, culture, or ethnicity. It has come to my attention that in recent years our nation's Sikh-American community has suffered numerous incidents of violence and discrimination. Unfortunately, too many mistakenly associate the Sikh articles of faith, in particular the turban, with terrorism. These acts of discrimination impact Sikh

students in New Jersey's public schools. For example, a fourth grade student was repeatedly taunted and grabbed by another student on the school bus. The taunts were directed against the Sikh student's long hair known as a *joora*. The incidents ended when the school's principal held educational sessions on Sikhs and Sikh practices for students and teachers. A sixth grade student was assaulted by a fellow student in a school bathroom. Another middle school student was punched in the head while being called "Osama" by a fellow student. The student's parents withdrew their son from school and sent him back to his native England to complete his schooling.

It is important that New Jersey school districts address the value of our state's diversity and emphasize treating everyone with respect. Creating a safe and civil environment for every student is not only the law—it is essential to our growth as a state and nation. I encourage schools to incorporate information about Sikhs and other cultural groups in social studies classes. The department's social studies webpage <http://www.nj.gov/njded/aps/cccs/ss/> serves as an excellent source of information. The Sikh-American community is poised to offer information for the school community to help eliminate bullying and harassment of Sikh students. For more information, please go to NJSikhEducation@yahoo.com or contact Gurburkash Singh at (908) 719-8625.

Please examine your own school culture to determine if the learning environment is one of acceptance and respect for all students. The behavior directed at students of the Sikh faith is conduct that should not be tolerated. Let's make our schools safe for all students.

LED/JD/LLM/s:Dougherty_Sikh memo

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