

Safe to Learn, Free to Belong: Protecting Muslim Students in Schools and on Campus

Prepared by MCRO from five reports and surveys published 2023–2026. Sources appear in grey, for example MSV 17 means Muslim Student Voices, page 17. The full list is on page 5.

Key message.

“This place may tolerate you, but it is not organized with your dignity and safety in mind.”

Muslim Student Voices MSV 17

Muslim students in Canada face hate at school and on campus. It comes from classmates, from staff, and from schools that don't act when students speak up PE 35–46 · IOR 7–10 · CH 22–23.

This brief looks at **K–12 schools** (pages 2–3) and **colleges and universities** (page 4) separately.

The evidence at a glance

IN ONTARIO SCHOOLS: THE MUSLIM STUDENT VOICES STUDY

30

Muslim students, ages 14 to 18, shared their experiences

46

audio diaries recorded by those students

Age 10

the youngest age at which students said online harassment began

943,000

Muslims live in Ontario, 6.7% of the population MSV 9

ACROSS CANADA

44%

of Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian racism cases reported to NCCM since October 2023 happened in education PE 39

42%

of Muslims often hold back what they say, for fear of how people will react SMiC 14

12%

of Muslims who faced discrimination at work or school reported it to the authorities SMiC 14

IN SCHOOLS (K–12)

What students face

From whom	What happens
Classmates	Students are called “terrorist,” often MSV 14–15 · CH 23. In one study, every Muslim high school student faced hate daily CH 22. A student with special needs was beaten by classmates who called him “ Hamas” PE 39.
Teachers	Commenting on or policing religious clothing. Calling students out in front of the class for asking for a religious accommodation MSV 14–15.
Discipline	Students suspended for wearing a keffiyeh or saying “Free Palestine” at recess PE 41.
The school	Reports go nowhere MSV 16. The beaten student got no ambulance. His family changed schools; his attackers stayed PE 39.
Fear	Students hide their faith before anything happens, because they expect hostility MSV 15.
Outside school	Profiling in stores, on transit and at borders MSV 18–19.

In their own words

ON BEING TARGETED

“I know who I am, and I also know that I’m not a terrorist.”

Aleiyah MSV 30

“You’re not a real Muslim because you’re Black.”

Said to Aleiyah by a classmate MSV 11

We lost “our sense of belonging, our sense of community, our sense of safety.”

A friend of Yumna Afzaal, 15, killed with her family in London, Ontario, in 2021 IOR 7

ON SPEAKING UP

“It’s kind of hard telling people things cause I don’t know if they’ll actually do something.”

Tasneem MSV 16

“I chose to protect my own peace.”

Aleiyah MSV 30

There is “no point in reporting.”

Students, as reported to the Senate CH 23

ON FAITH AND BELONGING

“I want to wear the hijab, I love the hijab, it’s part of my identity.”

Yusra MSV 15

“When you’re included, it’s priceless.”

Yusra MSV 35

“If you’re not at the table, you’re on the menu.”

Zayn MSV 42

IN SCHOOLS (K–12)

What schools can do: the four Rs

Schools, not students, should carry the burden MSV 53–55.

Recognize

Silence is a choice, not a failure. Ask: “What were you trying to protect?”

Respect

Never make a student confront someone, teach classmates or file a report.

Respond

Name the harm, prevent payback and follow up.

Resource

Offer private reporting, safe spaces, counselling and religious accommodation.

Priorities and who must act

1 Make reporting work

TEACHERS

SCHOOLS

BOARDS

PROVINCE

- **Teachers:** step in and name the harm when it happens MSV 48, then check in with the student privately MSV 44
- **Schools:** let students report privately; act on every report and follow up MSV 16, 55
- **Boards:** review how anti-Palestinian racism cases were handled and why they went unreported, and act on the independent review of the Toronto District School Board PE 54. Protect the targeted student first, and hold those responsible to account*
- **Province:** a strategy and complaints process against Islamophobia, as proposed in the Our London Family Act CH 37; clear province-wide rules for reporting Islamophobia*

2 Train staff and teach better

BOARDS

PROVINCE

FEDERAL

- **Boards:** back teachers on hard topics like Palestine; train staff on Islamophobia, building on Peel’s strategy, and set clear rules for religious accommodation MSV 14, 52 · CH 37
- **Province:** teach Palestinian culture, identity and history PE 54; fund staff training*
- **Federal:** classroom resources and a public campaign on Islamophobia CH 12

3 Respect faith, don’t police it

TEACHERS

SCHOOLS

PROVINCE*

- **Teachers:** no comments on, or policing of, religious clothing MSV 14
- **Schools:** handle religious requests privately; make room for iftar, Ramadan, halal food and prayer MSV 15, 35, 50, 52
- **Province:** make clear that a hijab, keffiyeh or lawful views are never grounds for discipline; set province-wide rules for accommodation and fund programs where Muslim students feel welcome*

* MCRO suggestion, not named in the reports. The Our London Family Act (Bill 86) was proposed in Ontario but has not passed.

ON CAMPUS (COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES)

What students face

Assaulted

Muslim women students at Western University were assaulted and spat on IOR 9

Blacklisted

law students, over a letter later found to be protected speech PE 36

3 cities

where universities called police to remove student encampments PE 45–46

7+ months

Western’s Muslim chaplain post sat empty after the chaplain was let go PE 37

Priorities and who must act

4 Protect free speech and safety

CAMPUSES

- **Campuses:** protect free expression, academic freedom and safety for everyone, and tell “unsafe” apart from “uncomfortable.” Appoint advisors on civil liberties, Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian racism IOR 44

5 Review what happens, and track it

CAMPUSES

FEDERAL

- **Campuses:** set up advisory groups on anti-Palestinian racism and order independent reviews PE 53
- **Federal:** fund data on campus Islamophobia and anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian discrimination; create a national review committee with students on it IOR 44

IN SCHOOLS AND ON CAMPUS

Belonging: Muslims compared with other Canadians

Adults, Survey of Muslims in Canada	Muslims	Others
Feel they belong less since October 7, 2023 SMiC 74	48%	24%
Born in Canada, but would rather live elsewhere SMiC 89	48%	29%
Unequal access to jobs, promotions or pay, at work or school SMiC 246	15.3%	7.4%
Not at all worried about government surveillance because of their religion SMiC 14	32%	71%

This survey covers adults (18+). No national survey yet tracks what Muslim, Arab and Palestinian students face at school.

What you can do

Start with the person closest to the problem. Move up only if nothing changes. The full list of asks is on pages 3 and 4.

Who	Ask for	How	Who to ask
Students	Halal food, prayer space, Ramadan and Eid MSV 35, 50, 52 . Private ways to report MSV 55 .	Go as a group through your Muslim Student Association or student council, as Yusra did for halal food MSV 35 , or start one MSV 41 . Keep private notes of incidents. Know your Charter rights*.	A trusted teacher, the principal; on campus, the dean or student union
Parents	Real follow-up after every report MSV 16 . Province-wide reviews of how schools handled cases PE 54 .	Put requests in writing and ask for a written reply. Ask the board for its complaint process*. Move up one step at a time.	Principal, then superintendent, school trustee, Minister of Education
Teachers and faculty	Required Islamophobia training CH 37 . Freedom to teach about Islam and Palestine*.	Ask for written guidance before a hard conversation. Raise needs through your union and equity committees. Share what works, like iftar nights MSV 50, 52 .	Principal, your union, the board's equity office, the university senate
Community groups	Programs and spaces where Muslim students feel welcome MSV 41 .	Run workshops and programs. Help students through complaints and discipline hearings*. Speak at school board meetings.	School trustees, the Ministry of Education, university presidents, MPs

* MCRO suggestion, not named in the reports. Advocacy steps are MCRO guidance.

Sources (numbers are page numbers; student names are as given in Muslim Student Voices)

MSV · Islamophobia Research Hub, York University, and the National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM) (2026). *Muslim Student Voices*.

PE · Islamophobia Research Hub (2025). *Documenting the "Palestine Exception"*. York University.

IOR · House of Commons Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights (2024). *Islamophobia on the Rise*.

CH · Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights (2023). *Combatting Hate: Islamophobia and Its Impact on Muslims in Canada*.

SMiC · Shah, S., & Nabi, S. (2026). *The Survey of Muslims in Canada*. University of Toronto.

ABOUT MCRO

The Muslim Communities Research Observatory is an independent research observatory. We collect and synthesize rigorous research on Muslim communities, turn it into policy briefs, dashboards and toolkits, and help leaders and organizations put that evidence to work.

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