

March 4, 2021

Re: Request to Cosponsor City Council Resolution Number 1257

Dear New York City Council Members,

We are writing on behalf of a broad coalition of faith-based and secular community organizations, civic institutions, educators, and religious leaders. Together, we urge you to cosponsor **City Council Resolution Number 1257**, which calls on the New York City Department of Education to provide age-appropriate religious diversity curricula for all students, and to offer professional development for teachers in this area. This resolution in support of religious literacy and mutual understanding will help to create a more just and inclusive city for all New Yorkers.

The human cost of religious illiteracy and misunderstanding is seen, all too clearly, in the disturbing rise of hate crimes against religious minorities in recent years. According to the most recent data available from the New York City Police Department and the NYC Office for the Prevention of Hate Crimes, nearly 220 hate crimes against New Yorkers were reported in the past year. Anti-religious incidents top the list of these crimes, 41% of which were motivated by anti-Semitism.¹ Nationally, the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting Program has found an alarming trend of increasing hate crimes against Jews, Sikhs, and Muslims since 2015.²

Bias-based incidents in our public schools have been severely underreported, as was shown in a 2019 audit conducted by the New York State Comptroller's office.³ We know, however, that students from minority faith communities too often face bullying and harassment at school. A 2014 survey by the Sikh Coalition found, for example, that 62% of turban-wearing Sikh students in Queens had experienced bias-based bullying, while 42% had been hit or involuntarily touched because of their turbans.⁴ And in a 2019 nationwide survey conducted by the Cyberbullying Research Center, 34% of American Muslims aged 12-17 reported being bullied at school because of their religion in the previous 30 days, along with 25% of Jews, 23% of Hindus, 16% of Catholics, and 14% of non-denominational Protestants.⁵

¹ Data from October 11, 2020. For full NYPD hate crime data see <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/nypd/stats/reports-analysis/hate-crimes.page>.

² For FBI annual reports of hate crime statistics see <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr/publications#Hate-Crime%20Statistics>.

³ For the Comptroller's report see <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/press/releases/2019/03/nyc-schools-underreporting-bullying-and-harassment>.

⁴ For data and discussion see "Go Home Terrorist': A Report on Bullying Against Sikh American School Children," at <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/documents/pdf/go-home-terrorist.pdf>.

⁵ For data and discussion see "Bullying Because of Religion," at <https://cyberbullying.org/bullying-and-religion>. For broader discussion of these issues see "Religious-Based Bullying: Insights on Research and Evidence-Based Best Practices from the National Interfaith Anti-Bullying Summit," at <https://www.ispu.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/ISPU-AMHP-Religious-Based-Bullying.pdf>.

Incidents like these do not happen in a vacuum. They are shaped by our social and political climate, which has unfortunately fostered religious bigotry in recent years. K-12 education about religious diversity would help to change this climate, by dispelling the stereotypes and misunderstandings that allow bigotry to take hold.

Bigotry, bullying, and hate crimes are pressing problems that the Department of Education must address, but the academic study of religion will also contribute to the DOE's fundamental educational goals. In order to be truly educated in American history, global studies, literature, or the arts, our students need a rich understanding of religious diversity. In order to participate in American civic life, they need an empathic understanding of their neighbors' religious lives. Effective teaching about religious diversity is thus essential to the health of our multicultural democracy.

Contrary to a widespread misunderstanding of the U.S. Constitution, the academic study of religion in public schools is entirely consistent with the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. Indeed, in the landmark 1963 Supreme Court decision that banned devotional Bible reading in public schools, Justice Tom Clark wrote for the court:

[I]t might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. . . . Nothing we have said here indicates that such study . . . when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.⁶

In the decades since this decision, clear guidelines have been developed by a number of national organizations (including the First Amendment Center, the American Academy of Religion, the National Council for the Social Studies, and others) to help K-12 teachers teach about religion within a secular, academic curriculum. Here in New York, a number of faith-based and secular organizations (including the Interfaith Center of New York, the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, the Sikh Coalition, the Muslim Community Network, and others) offer constitutionally sound religious diversity education programs for teachers and students. The DOE will have no shortage of willing partners in its effort to create and implement the curricula proposed in Resolution 1257.

The Department of Education's work in this area will no doubt serve as a model for cities and states throughout the country – thus helping to create a more just and inclusive society for all Americans. We urge you to support this important work, by cosponsoring City Council Resolution Number 1257. We appreciate your consideration of this request. Please feel free to contact Aniqah Nawabi (Executive Director of the Muslim Community Network) at aniqa.nawabi@mcnny.org, or Dr. Henry Goldschmidt (Director of Programs at the Interfaith Center of New York) at henry@interfaithcenter.org, with any questions.

Respectfully,

⁶ *Abington v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203. For full text see <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/374/203>.

Signatories

(affiliations in parentheses are for identification, and do not imply organizational endorsement)

Abdul Rashid Abdulai, African Muslim Youth Organization

Dr. Mehnaz Afridi, Holocaust, Genocide, and Interfaith Education Center at Manhattan College

Ramatu Ahmed, African Life Center

Dr. Debbie Almontaser, Bridging Cultures Group Inc.

American Atheists

American Pakistani Advocacy Group

Apna Brooklyn Community Center

Arab American Association of New York

Aspen Institute, Inclusive America Project

Dr. Michael Bos, Senior Minister of Marble Collegiate Church

Rev. Micah Bucey, Minister, Judson Memorial Church

Asad Dandia (Cordoba House and Columbia University Middle East Institute)

Rev. Frederick Davie, Executive Vice President of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York

Pastor Kaji Dousa, Park Avenue Christian Church

Dr. Diana Eck, Professor of Comparative Religion and Director of the Pluralism Project, Harvard University

Dr. Rajinder P. Gandhi, Tristate Arya Samaj Hindu Community

Naz Ahmed Georgas, Cordoba House

Rev. Joel A. Gibson, Executive Director of the Micah Institute

Rabbi Dr. Lisa D. Grant (Distinguished Service Professor in Jewish Education, Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Marc Greenberg, Interfaith Assembly on Homelessness and Housing

Dr. Bruce Grelle, Religion and Public Education Project, California State University, Chico

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Gurdwara Sant Sagar

Rev. Dr. Gwendolyn Hadley-Hall, Chair of the Micah Institute Education Committee

Rev. Curtis W. Hart, Commission on Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, Episcopal Diocese of New York

Dr. Charles Haynes (Founding Director of the Religious Freedom Center)

Hindu American Foundation

Interfaith Center of New York

Rev. Dr. Serene Jones, President of Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York

Dr. Khyati Y. Joshi, Co-Founder, Institute for Teaching Diversity and Social Justice

Kaurageous Love

Imam Naji Khaled, Masjid Al-Rahman
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Imam Khalid Latif, The Islamic Center at New
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Dr. Emile Lester, author of *Teaching about
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Rev. James Lynch, Buddhist Council of New
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Very Rev. Michael J. Lynch (Vicar for Ecu-
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Majlis Ash-Shura: Islamic Leadership Council
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Mohammed Mardah, African Advisory Council

Juhi Mawla (Munshi Atar Ali Welfare Society)

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Muslim Community Network

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Kristen Plylar-Moore (educator, playwright,
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Rabbi Joseph Potasnik, Executive Vice Pres-
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Sadhana: Coalition of Progressive Hindus

Franny Silverman (Jewish educator, social
justice activist, and theater artist)

Sikh American Legal Defense and Education
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The Sikh Center of New York, Inc.

Sikh Coalition

Sikh Coordination Committee East Coast

The Sikh Cultural Society of New York

Dr. Simran Jeet Singh (scholar, educator,
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Dr. Savitri Singh, MD PC

Pandit Vyaas Sukul, Vishnu Mandir

Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Under-
standing

Bakary Tandia, Abolition Institute

Hajie A. Tunkara (Islamic Cultural Center of the Bronx)

Mazeda A. Uddin, South Asian Fund for Education, Scholarship, and Training, Inc

United Federation of Teachers

Rabbi Dr. Burton L. Visotzky (Professor of Midrash and Interreligious Studies, Jewish Theological Seminary)

Shaykh Ibad Wali (Hillside Islamic Center)

Rev. Dr. Nathan C. Walker, Foundation for Religious Literacy and 1791 Delegates

Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality

Husein Yatabarry, Neighborhood United

Yemeni American Merchants Association

Venerable Ming Yu, American Buddhist Confederation

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