



## Sikh Coalition's Policy Principles for Creating Safer and More Inclusive Schools

The Sikh Coalition's policy principles regarding inclusive education are designed to provide clarity and transparency into our organizational positions on the intersection of education policy, efforts to improve the classroom experiences and general welfare of Sikh students, and current discourse and practices related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. We continue to assess these principles in our ongoing efforts to educate others (and become better educated ourselves) as we push for a generational shift in Sikh awareness and school environments where students of all communities feel both safe and seen.

As documented by the Sikh Coalition's [own studies](#), Sikh students experience disproportionate rates of bullying—often on account of their visible articles of faith. We believe that accurate and constitutionally appropriate education about Sikhs and Sikhi is a critical first step to stopping such bias and bigotry early before it can fester and grow into hate. Moreover, just as Sikhs demand the right to see our history, traditions, beliefs, and philosophy represented in a meaningful and holistic manner, so too do marginalized communities whose history has been either distorted or excluded from U.S. public education. Diverse educational materials don't just instill a sense of belonging and empowerment in students from marginalized communities—they cultivate empathy and among all students, providing a more well-rounded education for every child. And finally, as a community that has seen and felt the painful impact of white supremacy from 1909 in Bellingham, WA, to 2012 in Oak Creek, WI, we believe that it is vital we stand with others who have suffered similarly in promoting an education system that produces less prejudiced and more tolerant future citizens.

In general, advocating for the marginalized, championing equality, and embracing continuous learning are central to the Sikh faith. Accordingly, in the interest of protecting and developing our own youth and in keeping with the Sikh principle of *sarbat da bhala* (for the good of all), we choose to promote inclusive education and oppose those who seek to oppress, dismiss, and diminish the experiences of our or any other communities.

In general, the Sikh Coalition **supports** legislation, policy changes, and advocacy initiatives that seek to:

- Provide for accurate and constitutionally appropriate teaching about religion, including Sikhi, in classrooms;
- Include Sikhi alongside other world religions in state social studies standards, curricula, and classroom materials;
- Promote curriculum inclusion and classroom instruction regarding the histories and contributions of marginalized communities in the United States, including U.S.-based Sikhs;

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- Integrate diverse community perspectives into existing social studies curricula, rather than separate the histories experiences of communities from broader American history;
- Promote the development and use of inclusive ethnic studies curricula and content;
- Reduce and more effectively address the bias-based bullying of Sikh youth and bullying in general;
- Establish clear accommodation policies that allow youth who keep articles of faith and wear religious garb to maintain those items inside and outside of the classroom;
- Encourage and fund professional development for educators that equips them to teach about diverse communities and stop bias-based bullying; and
- Protect age appropriate and diverse texts from politically-motivated book bans (in schools and public libraries) and support the freedom to read.

In general, the Sikh Coalition **opposes** legislation, policy changes, and advocacy initiatives that seek to:

- Incorrectly define or characterize the Sikh faith tradition and Sikh history, including claims that Sikhi is an offshoot of Hinduism, a blend of Islam and Hinduism, or a “dharmic religious community.”
- Paint any one community, including the Sikh community, with a broad brush focused solely or primarily on extremism;
- Alter the process of updating state social studies standards in a way that benefits any one group or ideology or, in general, reduces transparency and accessibility;
- Explicitly ban, limit, or otherwise chill classroom instruction and discussions of so-called ‘controversial’ topics, including but not limited to white supremacy, systemic racism, racial equity, privilege, colonialism and imperialism, or an honest accounting of American history;
- Preference any one religious tradition over another in educational settings, whether via:
  - Instructional focus in the classroom (e.g. proselytizing a particular religious belief rather than teaching about religion);
  - Practices that alienate students not of a specific religious tradition (e.g. non-elective school prayer or the display of the Christian ten commandments); or
  - Direct services provided to students (e.g. religious chaplains supplementing or substituting for school guidance counselors);
- Impose politically-motivated book bans (in schools and libraries) or other forms of academic censorship designed to define certain authors, topics, or communities as too ‘controversial’ for students;
- Fire, criminalize, or otherwise punish teachers, librarians, and other professionals who stand for inclusive education and educational environments; and
- Cynically elevate any one marginalized community’s representation in education at the expense of other marginalized communities’ representation in the same.

### **Sikh Coalition’s Inclusive Education Work: Frequently Asked Questions**

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The Sikh Coalition values community questions and engagement on all of our advocacy work. In our effort to provide clarity and transparency, we want to directly answer some of the most frequently asked questions regarding our work involving inclusive education.

*The Sikh Coalition's Work to Get Sikhi in Classrooms*

**Where has the Sikh Coalition worked to include Sikhi in state social studies standards so far?** For the most up to date list of states where we have advocated for and won Sikh inclusion in social studies standards, please see [this page](#) on our website.

**Why hasn't the Sikh Coalition worked on the social studies standards in my state?** Each state has a different timeline and process for updating standards, but the Sikh Coalition continuously tracks all 50 states in search of the next advocacy opportunity. However, states also vary in the specificity of their standards, meaning that there may not be an opportunity for Sikhi to be listed among world religions (if world religions are not listed at all); in these cases, we often work to ensure that Sikhi is instead mentioned in other documents called frameworks or related content. If you have specific questions about how Sikh is or isn't represented in your state's standards, please email [education@sikhcoalition.org](mailto:education@sikhcoalition.org).

**What can I do to help ensure that Sikhi is taught in my child's classroom and/or school?** To effect long term change, join our education advocacy initiatives for inclusive policy change if/when they occur in your state. In the more immediate term, however, the Sikh Coalition has worked for more than 20 years to create and curate a robust library of educational materials that students and parents can bring into classrooms, including lesson plans, discussion guides for books by Sikh authors, resources for teachers and administrators, and more; view all of these resources on [this page](#) of our website.

**What is accurate and constitutionally appropriate education?** Accurate education is just that—factual information about the Sikh community. For example, the Sikh Coalition previously spent more than six years working to correct over 50 factual errors in K-12 textbooks, including passages which falsely claimed “Sikhism is a branch of Hinduism.” Constitutionally appropriate education means teaching about religions, but not doing so in a way that proselytizes any religious belief or otherwise elevates one religious tradition or faith community over others.

**My student goes to a private school. Does that change how I approach conversations about Sikhi and other issues with their teachers and administrators?** Yes, in so far as every private school is unique, and oftentimes not required to extend the same level of bullying, discrimination, and accommodation protections to students that public schools are. Parents of Sikh students in private schools should consider:

- Learning about their school's mission statement, values, strategic vision, and student/family handbook to locate how the school is envisioning and enacting commitments to safety, belonging, and affirmational learning spaces for all children;

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- Searching within the private school's faculty and staff to identify the people who are dedicated to fostering inclusive learning spaces, such as Directors of Diversity, Equity, and Belonging;
- Seeking more information about their school's commitment to anti-bullying, their relevant policies or protections; and
- Directly engage teachers and administrators with [Sikh Coalition resources](#) to encourage inclusion of Sikhs and Sikhi in classrooms, just like the parents of public school students.

### **Does the Sikh Coalition work on any of these issues as they related to higher education?**

To date, the majority of our work has focused on K-12 public education. However, we view higher education—and increasing political attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) therein—as interconnected to similar challenges in K-12 public education. Sikh students in colleges, universities, and graduate schools deserve our support and solidarity as well.

### *The Sikh Coalition's Work on Inclusive Educational Content*

**Why does the Sikh Coalition advocate for education bills and initiatives that advance Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) history?** Among the racial categories most commonly listed in the United States, the racial identities that are claimed by the majority of Sikhs (including Punjabi, Indian, and numerous South Asian communities and nationalities, as well as those who consider 'Sikh' itself to be their racial identity) fall under the wider umbrella of Asian American. For this reason, supporting Asian American and/or AANHPI inclusion is often the most effective and efficient way to include the Sikh history, culture, and community when the focus is on race or ethnicity rather than identity.

**Why does the Sikh Coalition advocate for education bills and initiatives that advance other racial or ethnic groups' histories?** As articulated above, in the spirit of *sarbat da bhala*, the Sikh Coalition believes that all students deserve to feel safe and seen in their classrooms. Just as we advocate for hate crime bills that cover all protected characteristics or fight for legal victories that protect the civil rights of all faith traditions, we also conduct our education work alongside and to the benefit of allies in order to achieve better results for all students. Moreover, the Sikh community is also increasingly ethnically and racially diverse, and we want to encourage the full exploration of *all* of our sangat members' lived experiences.

**Why is ethnic studies relevant to Sikh students?** Ethnic studies includes the stories of people of different ethnicities and how they have fared in the history of the United States. This experience obviously includes the Sikh community, which has experienced challenges and made invaluable contributions to the United States over more than 125 years. Through ethnic studies, students (Sikh and otherwise) can also gain insight into the shared struggles and triumphs of diverse communities, fostering solidarity and empathy in the pursuit of social justice and equity. Learning about the diverse histories is also a best practice in preparing students to be citizens of a pluralistic society and excel at both cooperation and competition in an interconnected world.

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**Isn't focusing so much on race or religion unnecessarily divisive—especially for younger children?** Even—and sometimes especially—young children inherently understand the value of representation: seeing themselves reflected in stories, reading their history in textbooks, and knowing that they can relate to classroom discussions. Moreover, educating *all* students about underrepresented communities is essential to combat the early development of bias, which left unattended, can fester and grow into fear or even hate. In this way, how information about history and culture is included in educational materials dramatically affects how safe and inclusive our classrooms are for students.

**Are any of these allegedly 'divisive' topics even relevant to Sikh students or the Sikh community?** Yes. Many of the topics that opponents of CRT (see below), DEI, and inclusive education in general describe as 'divisive' are extremely relevant to our students, our communities, our history, and our ability to thrive in the present. For example:

- It is a fact that **white supremacy** is a threat to the Sikh community. Numerous hate crimes against Sikhs in the United States have been committed by individuals with white supremacist beliefs—most notably the deadly 2012 attack on the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin.
- Sikhs have experienced **systemic racism**, or racism perpetuated by individuals rather than institutions, just like other marginalized communities in the United States. The Sikh Coalition fields numerous legal intakes every year of Sikhs who are denied the right to maintain their *kesh* or *dastar* by employers, the Transportation Security Administration has disproportionately profiled Sikh travelers at airports for years, and post-9/11 U.S. government policies continue to negatively affect Sikhs and others to this day.
- Honest education about both **colonialism and imperialism** are integral to understanding Sikh history—including the Sikh community's growth under Mughal, Sikh, British, and Indian rule historically and its current condition in India, the United States, and elsewhere.

**What is the Sikh Coalition's stance on parents' rights?** The Sikh Coalition knows that parents have many rights, including the right to play a central role in their child's education, expect that their children are kept safe from bullying, and have language accessible conversations with school officials. That being said, some political groups use the phrase "parents' rights" to push for attacks on inclusive education, chill discussion of topics or marginalized groups they find objectionable, or otherwise try to impose their own views on everyone. Ultimately, any claim of "parents' rights" to push a given policy must be assessed on its merits; the Sikh Coalition uses the above outlined principles to do so.

*The Sikh Coalition's Work on Bullying*

**Why does the Sikh Coalition focus so much on bullying?** Our focus in school bullying is directly informed by our pro bono legal work and studies our organization has undertaken to understand the lived experiences of Sikh youth. Based on our 2014 study, we know that 67% of

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Sikh students who wear a *dastaar* or *patka* report being bullied in school, which reflects a rate of bullying more than two times the national average. This is a crisis which continues to impact our children and our community, and one that we must continue to address for the safety and security of our sangat.

**My student is being bullied. What can the Sikh Coalition do to help?** There are numerous potential steps to take if you believe your child is being bullied, but the first step is to talk to them, document everything, and reach out to their school. Learn more about how the Sikh Coalition can help [here](#), and contact our legal team for assistance by filling out our intake form [here](#).

**Sikh students just need to fight back against bullying.** We recognize that Sikhi is a faith tradition that compels us to stand up—sometimes literally—against injustice. Unfortunately, “zero tolerance” policies, which in many cases dole out maximum punishments for *any* physical altercations between students (regardless of who or what starts the fight), are a reality in a vast majority of schools. In our experience, the risks that a flawed and biased system pose to students from marginalized communities who are bullied can be greater than their ability to properly address students who *are* bullies. To that end, we continue to believe that documenting and reporting are the best ways to navigate bullying cases, and that front-end prevention efforts like inclusive education are equally important.

### *Critical Race Theory*

**What is Critical Race Theory (CRT)?** Critical race theory (CRT) is a college-level scholarly framework that is more than 50 years old. CRT emphasizes that racism is not just the result of individual bias, but that it is embedded in the institutions and policies of the United States. CRT provides an analysis of how racial inequities continue to hold back advancements for minority communities in the hope of our society being better able to understand intentional and unintentional bias and the communities it impacts.

**Is CRT taught in K-12 public schools?** No. Most education experts recognize that CRT is primarily a college-level academic theory that is not being taught in almost any K-12 classrooms.

**If CRT is not taught in K-12 public schools, why are state lawmakers introducing laws to stop it from being taught?** Several states have proposed legislation that bars teachers from teaching ‘controversial’ concepts like white privilege and racial equity. Many of these bills don't mention CRT, but are instead vague restrictions designed to restrict classroom discussion of our nation's deeply rooted challenges with racism. Even when these bills do not get enacted into law, they still have ‘chilling’ effects on teachers and schools that are terrified of backlash against any initiatives to improve diversity and inclusion. Political rhetoric has rallied individuals to mobilize against school districts and educators at school board meetings and elsewhere to make sure they are not ‘indoctrinating’ students with a ‘liberal agenda.’

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**How do these attacks on CRT and inclusive learning impact the Sikh community?** As discussed above, we have learned through our work that how history and culture are included in standards, curricula, and educational material affects how safe and inclusive our classrooms are for students. The conversation over how marginalized communities in America, such as the Sikh community, are represented and included in schools is severely impacted by attacks on CRT and inclusive education. Unfortunately, CRT has been wrongfully twisted to now include virtually *any* discussion of race, identity, or culture. This, in turn, puts our work to continue accurately having Sikhs and Sikhi community represented in standards, curriculums, and education materials in peril. Not only may we not see more representation and inclusion of Sikhs in classroom settings—we also risk seeing more misinformation arise against the Sikh community. And as mentioned above, in keeping with the principle of *sarbat da bhala* and our civil rights principles, we believe in standing with all communities who face these same challenges.

**Why has CRT become a polarizing political topic?** As millions of Americans began reckoning with ongoing high-profile cases of unarmed Black men being murdered by police, including George Floyd's murder in May 2020, society began to re-examine America's history of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans in the United States. During the contentious 2020 presidential election and in election cycles since, CRT became a political ploy to further divide people on issues of race and identity. Some of the rhetoric claims there is a 'war' against white Americans to scare voters, yet many people who condemn CRT haven't read academic materials or studied it intensely. As a result of this political rhetoric, disinformation has spread that CRT is not just a scholarly framework dealing with systemic racism but broadly includes anything related to diversity and inclusion.

### *Book Bans*

**Why are some states passing laws in favor of or against book bans?** Similarly to politically motivated attacks on CRT and diversity in education, book bans are increasingly being used by some advocacy groups as a tool to oppose representation for specific communities (including the LGBTQ+ community) and restrict classroom conversations about race, diversity, and history. Some states are trying to pass laws that will make book bans and other censorship easier, and in extreme cases, punish educators or librarians who defy them; other states, conversely, are attempting to ban such practices.

**How do book bans impact the Sikh community?** At first glance, the Sikh community may appear largely insulated from these current political conversations. However, we generally oppose book bans and other attempts at academic censorship for four reasons:

- First, Sikh authors have had their books banned just like authors from every other community, which represents an undue restriction of the honest exploration of all aspects of the lived experiences of our community.
- Second, the banning of books that shed light on marginalized groups causes students to miss out on the opportunity to explore cultures and perspectives outside of their own and develop positive associations with the diverse communities around them. This leaves

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more students ill-prepared to be well-informed citizens in a diverse and pluralistic democracy.

- Third, book bans go against basic American values of free speech and the marketplace of ideas. Instead, they substitute the individual judgments of teachers, librarians, and most importantly parents and students with sweeping, often sensationalized claims by individual political actors about what is and isn't good for *every* child.

**Aren't some books inappropriate for children?** While we recognize that not all books are suitable for every age group, it is crucial to differentiate between age-appropriateness and outright censorship. The Sikh Coalition trusts in the judgment of individual students, parents, teachers, and nonpartisan groups like the American Library Association on this question, as opposed to politically-motivated activist groups that are overtly hostile to already marginalized communities and/or honest classroom discussions about race, diversity, and U.S. history.