



How to Respond to Discrimination in Schools: Advice to Parents

If students believe that other students, teachers, or school staff members are treating them in a discriminatory way, here are some steps which may remedy the situation.

While not all prejudicial attitudes are overt, you must be able to cite specific words or actions which demonstrate anti-Arab bias (specific negative references to Arabs or Muslims). Otherwise, there is no proof which will persuade an objective observer. It is wise to keep detailed notes of such words and actions as they occur. Witnesses are also important, or else it often comes down to the word of one person against another.

First Steps

Parents should first approach the teacher or principal. Describe the incident(s) and the effect on your child. If appropriate, listen to the person who is the alleged offender and get their version of the incident. Ask for appropriate action to correct the situation.

If the results are unsatisfactory, go to the next higher authority — a principal or a school district office. Most school districts will have an office of Human Relations or Multiculturalism and Equity, which handles such complaints. Give them the details of the situation. (Outline the problem, but don't overload them with details in your initial contact.) Also provide them with ADC information about the larger problem of discrimination which Arab Americans have encountered in schools around the country.

You can also contact the local ADC chapter or other Arab-American organizations. Ask for their support.

You will be in a stronger position if you first research the multicultural and anti-discrimination principles, policies and regulations of your school district and your state's Department of Education. There will be a procedure to file an official complaint. They will have websites with relevant information, as well as print material available to the general public.

Also, consider the school atmosphere and larger context within which any particular incident takes place. Is there a history of discriminatory behavior against Arab Americans or others? What kind of corrective action has the school taken? What proactive steps has it taken to foster mutual understanding among those of different ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds?

ADC Support: Legal Assistance and Educational Resources



The ADC national office or local chapter may be able to provide support in the form of information or a letter or call of concern to the school. Often the problem is at the level of human relations and is not a legal issue. It is often a “judgment call” as to whether or not an official complaint or a lawsuit is appropriate. Please consult first with the ADC Legal Department. ADC can also provide information on Arab Americans, on discrimination, or the Arab world for parents, teachers or school districts. Many of these materials are available on this website.

It may be appropriate to file a formal complaint with the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Education. For information on filing a complaint, check the DOE website at: <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/index.html?src=mr>

Please note that most school districts receive federal funding. They are obligated to take active steps to prevent discrimination. If there is a “pattern of discrimination” in their schools, they stand to lose these funds. This provides strong motivation for school systems to take a strong stand against bias. Since September 11, most schools are much more aware of the problem of anti-Arab discrimination and ready to take preemptive measures.

Human Relationships, School Policies, and Educational Programs

Advise your children about how to handle incidents of harassment. They should “walk away” and refuse to enter into situations of confrontation, even if they are physically assaulted. Schools normally have policies which punish everyone involved in fights, not just the student who started the fight. If students fight back, they must be prepared to suffer the consequences — suspension or other penalties.

Trust your instincts. If you or your children become uncomfortable in the school setting, there is likely something wrong about the situation. Such an atmosphere may involve attitudes you encounter, tones of voice, stares, teasing or inappropriate jokes, conversations which suddenly stop when you enter the room, subtle forms of exclusion, or inappropriate and frequent references to your ethnicity, race or religion.

Such things are signals that the school has not yet created an atmosphere of genuine openness, understanding, and acceptance of Arab Americans. The problem may be more about the effective implementation of school policy than just about the attitudes of individuals.

Don’t overreact. Keep your cool. Parents are justifiably upset if their child is being harassed. At the same time, the parents’ emotional reaction can also have a negative impact on their children. It can make the situation worse and be a barrier to a successful resolution of the problem.



The solution may require a stronger school policy against harassment and more conscientious efforts by educators to reach out to the Arab-American community. This could consist of meetings with parents and community leaders at the school or at an Arab-American home, church, mosque or community organization. Some communities have invited teachers and school officials to “town meetings,” Ramadan dinners, and other social and educational events, which serve to build positive relationships with educators.

Schools can also hold special classes and assemblies, set up cultural exhibits, hold teacher in-service programs, utilize classroom resources recommended by the community, and more consciously include Arab-American resources and perspectives where appropriate in classes in social studies, world and American history, geography, current events, civics and government, world religions and world literature, sociology and psychology. For classroom resources, check the other educational materials on the ADC website.

Our goal should be to bring about a positive change in attitudes and behavior, greater respect for Arab Americans, and a better understanding of the Arab world. A punitive attitude which puts educators on the defensive is unlikely to yield a satisfactory outcome. Often a negative event can be the catalyst for bringing about a positive change at an academic level and at the level of classroom relationships.