



NATIONAL
COUNCIL
OF CANADIAN
MUSLIMS

Your Voice. Your Future.

NCCM

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT TOWN HALL

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO MISSISSAUGA

BACKGROUND

ON MAY 8, 2017, THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CANADIAN MUSLIMS (NCCM) BROUGHT 31 YOUNG PEOPLE TOGETHER TO TALK ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES AS MUSLIM STUDENTS IN ONTARIO CLASSROOMS.

The Quebec Mosque shooting, the public reaction to the government motion M103, and the religious accommodation and prayer debate at the Peel District School board, have all contributed to the recent wave of conversations about where Muslims fit in Canada.

For young Muslim Canadians trying to understand and build their own Muslim identity, the debates, negative imagery, and news stories don't go unnoticed. As one student put it "When anything bad happens in the world the first thing I think is 'please God don't let it be a Muslim'. When it is a Muslim, I feel like I have to put on my armour as I leave my house and go to school".

We rarely hear these student voices. In the case of the Peel District School board debate, we found that we were hearing a lot from parents, teachers, school board trustees, and politicians, but not so much from the students themselves.

We thought it important to provide Muslim students a space to debrief with their peers and provide feedback on what their schools are doing well, and where there is a need for improvement.

This report, provides a snapshot of those voices.



SCHOOLS/ SCHOOL BOARDS REPRESENTED

NAME OF SCHOOL	SCHOOL BOARD
Stephen Lewis SS	Peel District School Board
Vista Heights Public School	Peel District School Board
Jean Augustine SS	Peel District School Board
Olive Grove School	Islamic School (Private)
Brebeuf High School	Toronto Catholic District School Board
Sir John A Macdonald CI	Toronto District School Board
Middlefield Collegiate Institute	York Region District School Board
Turner Fenton Secondary School	Peel District School Board
White Oaks Secondary School	Halton District School Board
Holy Name of Mary Secondary School	Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board
Sir Wilfred Laurier CI	Toronto District School Board
Islington Junior Middle School	Toronto District School Board
Etobicoke Collegiate Institute	Toronto District School Board
Westmount Secondary School	Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board
Notre Dame Catholic Secondary School	Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board
Applewood Heights Secondary School	Peel District School Board
ISNA High School	Islamic School (Private)
Brampton Centennial Secondary School	Peel District School Board
Erindale Secondary School	Peel District School Board
Westdale Secondary School	Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board
John Fraser Secondary School	Peel District School Board
J. Clarke Richardson Collegiate	Durham District School Board

BREAKDOWN OF GRADES REPRESENTED

GRADE	NUMBER OF STUDENTS
5	2
7	4
9	8
10	6
11	5
12	6

Number of Students: 31

PROCESS

Students were placed in groups of 6-8 and were taken through a facilitated discussion. Discussions lasted about 30-40 minutes. Individual groups were asked to take notes of their discussion comments and then present

them to the entire group as part of a wider conversation. Students were also given the option to submit a written reflection.

TOWNHALL FINDINGS

SCHOOL CLIMATE

All groups shared stories of experiencing racist, Islamophobic and/or xenophobic commentary from their classmates. Many expressed that comments were passed off as jokes and so they struggled to identify ways to deal with comments that bothered them without being made out to be overly sensitive.

In some cases, students were satisfied with how the school dealt with students making inappropriate comments. In other cases, students felt like teachers did not know how to handle the issues.

Some students expressed feeling like there was an assumption that all bad things that happen in the world are caused by Muslims.

Students felt that there was a lack of knowledge about Islam amongst their classmates that resulted in a lot of ignorant questions. In particular, female students who wore the hijab reported feeling like they were constantly fielding questions about their headscarf from students and teachers.

Some students felt very lonely and excluded from school life and activities because of their Muslim Identity.

On the other hand, in schools where there was a large population of Muslims, students often felt a greater sense of comfort, belonging and community.





CHALLENGES FACED BY MUSLIM STUDENTS

Many students expressed feeling somewhat constrained by the implicit power dynamics that exist between teachers, administrators, staff and students. They noted this dynamic often made it difficult to challenge anything teachers may say about Islam or world events.

Students who wore the hijab, or are more visibly Muslim, expressed feeling more tension and being treated differently from their Muslim friends who weren't as visibly Muslim.

Students felt that even when they made the effort to teach others about their religion they still faced racism and negative comments about their religious beliefs.

Students expressed feeling the pressure of having to be the "ambassador" for Islam, but not having the tools to combat questions or interrogation.

Many students expressed that pranks against Muslims or terrorist jokes were a norm in their school amongst peers.

Students who had no organized Muslim Students Association (MSA) in their school found it difficult to ask for accommodations that already fall within their rights, (i.e. prayer space), while those who did have an MSA felt that the presence of an MSA gave them a sense of community. However, students who did have an MSA in their school also said that there was no consistency in rules. Prayer time, while allowed, is always in a different room or no room at all, and they struggle to find a teacher to agree to volunteer as their supervisor.

Overwhelmingly, students signaled that they were experiencing a kind of identity crisis. The stigmas associated with Islam and being Muslim, coupled with feelings of needing to always explain and defend Islam, has made it difficult for students to fit in and define their own identities at school.



NEEDED SUPPORTS

- Students identified a need for more people to support Muslim students. They expressed that greater representation in teaching staff would go a long way.
- Students expressed the need for school-wide strategies to deal with Islamophobic rhetoric and actions, and to learn about what bystander intervention could look like.
- Students felt the existence of an MSA at school could be very helpful in creating a sense of community, and noted that it is often difficult to find teachers that are willing and able to act as support staff for a Muslim student group.
- Many students drew links between Islamophobia and mental health. Students expressed the need for more Muslim counselors in schools – they reported feeling that sometimes school counselors do not understand their family dynamics or religious adherence.
- Students expressed a desire to have greater clarity regarding accommodations for Ramadan, especially during school events.

WHAT ALLYSHIP LOOKS LIKE

- **Solidarity and Action**

Students expressed frustration with feeling like defending Muslims against hate was a Muslim-only responsibility. Students expressed the need for more support and ally-ship from friends, teachers, staff and administrators.

- **Education**

Students expressed the need for increased education on combating Islamophobia at school and on social media.

- **Support for Educators**

Students saw their teachers as important allies in combating Islamophobia. But identified that their educators had significant knowledge gaps when it came to supporting Muslim students. Students expressed the need for providing teachers with the tools and training needed to speak against Islamophobic comments. Many felt that training for teachers on Islam and Islamophobia would make it easier to ask for support spaces and accommodations for Muslims students (i.e. MSAs, prayers space, halal foods etc.)



STUDENT QUOTES

"My school is 99% white. I am one of the few Muslims and I find that this has a negative impact on my learning environment. I feel like I am constantly having to deal with the assumptions made about Islam by my classmates and by teachers. I often find myself having to answer questions about gender issues, misogyny, terrorism and violence as if they are Islamic things."

Grade 9 Student,
Halton District School Board

"With so many negative things being said about Muslims I feel a lot of pressure to prove people wrong. I wear hijab, so I already feel different. I get treated differently, so I have to try really hard at being the best student, the most approachable, the funniest. I feel a lot of pressure to be exceptional. I can't make mistakes"

Grade 9 Student,
Peel District School Board





"Whenever something bad happens in the world that involves a Muslim, I feel like I have to leave my house with an armour. I always go prepared to deal with questions, or ignorance."

Grade 11 Student,
Dufferin-Peel District School

"I have a lot of Muslims at my school, so I feel like the Islamophobia is not as direct or blatant. People make jokes to Muslims about terrorism, or bombing things, and everyone just passes it off as a joke"

Grade 10 Student,
Peel Catholic District School Board

"We had an Athletics Banquet last year that fell during the second week of Ramadan. There were seven Muslim students attending that were fasting. We asked that our meals be saved until Iftar time. Although we were told that this was going to be done, the organizers forgot about us, and all they could offer us at Iftar was some leftover salad"

Grade 11 Student,
Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School

RESPONSES FROM WRITTEN SURVEYS (15 WERE COLLECTED)

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY IS THE GENERAL ATMOSPHERE AROUND MUSLIMS OR ISLAM AT YOUR SCHOOL?

- Not a topic too many people want to discuss
- Our school is quite open to Islam; the main issue tends to be policy obstructing religious freedom
- Not a topic that anyone will intentionally bring up
- Joking towards Muslims, treading lightly around Muslims
- Ranging from apathy, to being hateful
- Positive, cooperative, encouraging, supportive
- There is vast diversity and more inclusion of Muslims within the school
- There isn't much Islamophobia at my school, there was a campaign to educate students about Islamophobia.
- Mocking Muslim words in a disrespectful manner
- Struggle to find teacher supervision for Muslims
- Muslims in the media not addressed (biases)
- Okay but tense
- Not a topic anyone discusses
- It is calm and everyone is welcome
- There is a positive atmosphere; people are very encouraging and supportive
- The atmosphere is very passive; there isn't a lot happening at my school that avidly supports Muslims
- The atmosphere is very positive due to the vast number of Muslims at my school

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES YOU FACE AS A MUSLIM IN HIGH SCHOOL?

- Stereotypical jokes
- It is hard to find a consistent location to pray
- Everybody in the school feels like what you say is what every Muslim goes by, but we're all different.
- Ambassadors for Islam/hate crimes and hateful things said
- No Muslim Students Association and no Jummah prayer
- Having to "explain" my religion and people being shocked when I tell them I am Muslim because I don't wear a hijab and people thinking all Muslims are extremists.
- Getting ready to defend ourselves after a terrorist attack strikes.
- Feeling alone when you're put in a situation where you have to stick up for your religion
- Identity crisis (I don't wear shorts and tank tops to school)
- Trying harder than others to be accepted
- Feel like you have no voice, as well as many jokes
- Being labelled
- No prayer location and it is difficult in the winter to pray at home
- Not all the Muslims are very practicing and it is sometimes hard to fit in with them as well
- Being looked at as the ambassador of all Muslims. (Need to know everything going on)
- There is a lot of stigma outside of school and it can affect my performance in school



WHAT ROLE CAN ALLIES PLAY IN COMBATING RACISM AND ISLAMOPHOBIA AT YOUR SCHOOL?

- Voicing their opinion
- Educating people on the topic
- Supportive teachers/advisors and peers tend to help combat Islamophobia
- They can help the Muslims to help make those who are Islamophobic not feel the way they do
- Show up
- Address Islamophobia to Admin
- Teachers could be more supportive and they could reach out to students more often
- They can reach out to more students
- Help to educate people on Islam
- Educating their communities
- Speaking out when you hear something wrong
- Teachers addressing the way the media portrays certain ethnicity/religions
- Muslim Counselors
- Learn about Islam
- Helping me stand up against Islamophobia and racism
- Acknowledge us more often, our holidays (Eid may fall on my third exam, for example)
- Allies can try to be more supportive towards Muslims
- Openly supporting Muslim groups, making announcements and standing and supporting our victories
- Creating safe spaces and having productive discussions and dialogue surrounding current issues



WHAT SUPPORTS DO YOU WISH YOU HAD AT SCHOOL TO HELP CREATE AN INCLUSIVE, SAFE ENVIRONMENT?

- More teachers to be open-minded and more caring
- I wish there was more Muslims in the community system so there was someone who knew what everyone talked about
- More Muslim staff
- More encouraging teachers
- Principal including more Islamic-related activities at school
- Guidance counselor
- Teachers who cared
- An adult to educate non-Muslim staff about Ramadan and what accommodations are needed.
- Again, talking about media biases for certain ethnicity/religions and accommodations for Ramadan (i.e. gym class)
- Diversity among teachers
- Change the history curriculum!!! It is unfair that we learn only about history from the British perspective. It makes us feel like outsiders.
- More information about islamophobia
- Having an MSA
- More support from teachers and fellow students in making our needs easy to meet
- An active MSA, supported by a reliable teacher
- There is such a large majority of Muslims that most of our needs are met. One thing would be nice to have an MSA or MSA led dinner
- More resources on how to expand clubs and create outreach





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The NCCM is an independent nonprofit, non-partisan, grassroots advocacy organization. It is a leading voice for Muslim civic engagement and the promotion of human rights

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