

THE EXPERIENCE OF SIKH STUDENTS IN PEEL AND SURROUNDING AREAS

SURVEY AND ANALYSIS REPORT

2025 UPDATE

BY THE WORLD SIKH ORGANIZATION OF CANADA





WSO BULLYING SURVEY

GENERAL DATA TABLE

Data Type	No. of Students	Percentage
Number of Total Ontario Surveys	380	N/A
Number of Students Who Attended Peel District School Board (PDSB)	252	66.3%
Total Ontario Surveys <12	172	45.26%
Total Ontario Surveys >12	208	54.74%
Students Bullied for their Sikh identity	131	34.47%
Students who outwardly wore identifiable articles of faith (dastaar/patka, kirpan) who experienced bullying	84/219	38.35%



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bullying continues to be one of the biggest challenges facing young people. Students of a Sikh background in particular face difficulties; this report aims to bring a better understanding of these challenges.

Over the summer of 2025, the World Sikh Organization of Canada (WSO) conducted surveys amongst Sikhs attending camps and community programs across Ontario, including Khalsa Gurmat Academy, Sikhi Maarag Trust, Ontario Khalsa Darbar, Gursevak, Sahibzada Academy, and Guru Nanak Mission Centre. This survey follows similar efforts undertaken by the WSO in 2011 and 2016. The objective of this study is to measure the prevalence of bullying targeted towards the Sikh identity and to examine the remediation options available to schools, parents/guardians, and students themselves.

Included in the report is the following:

- Key bullying statistics of Sikh students
- The motivations of bullying
- Frequency and nature of bullying experienced
- Reasons why they are bullied

In 2025, 131 of 380 students (34.47%) reported bullying because of their Sikh identity - up from 26.9% in 2016. Of those bullied, an overwhelming 97% wore at least one article of faith, with the largest proportions among those who had Kesh (uncut hair) and a Kara (47%) or Kesh (uncut hair), Kara, and a Dastaar/Patka (41%). A small minority, 3%, of those bullied did not wear any articles of faith.

When asked how students affected by bullying responded, 73% of students took some action, such as telling their parents, speaking to the bully directly, or reporting to school staff. However, the effectiveness of these approaches varied. Among those who retaliated, 55% reported the issue was resolved at least partially, while 45% reported it was not. Overall, 36% of bullied students reported incidents to school staff, but confidence in school responses was low: 51% reported their school was not helpful at all, while only 18% described their school as very helpful. Another handful of students indicated that meaningful action was only taken once parents became involved. Some students' testimonies detail having their kara forcibly removed, while others described being mocked for their names, body hair, or knowledge of the Sikh identity. Several students shared experiences of physical altercations, ostracization, and stereotypical comments such as being mislabeled Hindu, being called "curry muncher," or teased about Indian food. One student noted, "naturally, being one of the only Sikh students in the entire 900+ population school there will be xenophobia." These statements highlight both the physical and social exclusion that Sikh students continue to face.

The results of this survey reveal that bullying remains a serious and ongoing issue for Sikh students. Many continue to be teased, harassed, or excluded for looking or speaking differently, keeping visible articles of faith, or bearing non-English names. It is our firm belief that this research can assist the wider community of educators, practitioners, and policymakers to better understand these dynamics and take meaningful steps to address them.

The World Sikh Organization of Canada

The World Sikh Organization of Canada (WSO) is a national, non-profit organization that promotes and protects the rights and interests of Sikhs in Canada and globally, while advancing universal human rights and civil liberties for all. WSO engages in advocacy, education, and legal support, and collaborates with community, school, and government partners to foster safe, inclusive environments.

Contact

For questions about this report, please contact Balpreet Singh, Legal Counsel (WSO).

¹*Dastaar/Patka, typically referred to as a Turban.*

METHODOLOGY

This survey builds upon earlier WSO efforts conducted in 2011 and 2016, which highlighted strong correlations between the visibility of Sikh articles of faith and the frequency of bullying. The 2025 survey aims to provide an updated picture of the experiences of Sikh students across Ontario, with particular attention to whether trends have shifted over time.

Students ranging from kindergarten to university were surveyed, with ages spanning from 5–21 years old and an average age of 12. The majority of participants were drawn from Khalsa Gurmat Academy, Sikhi Maarag Trust, Ontario Khalsa Darbar, Gursevak, Sahibzada Academy, and Guru Nanak Mission Centre. Of the total 380 Sikh students surveyed, 66.3% (252 students) were enrolled in the Peel District School Board.

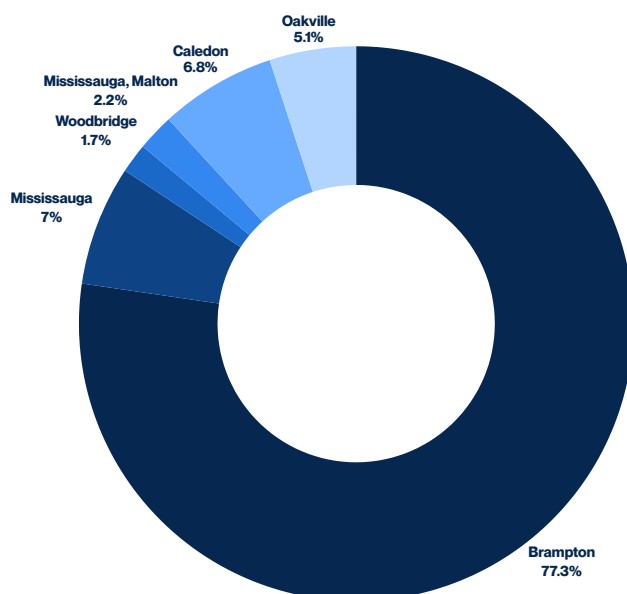
The surveys that were conducted followed a unique format that first introduced participants to WSO's work through age-tailored presentations and workshops. For younger children (ages 5–8), the presentation promoted courage and advocacy, emphasizing bravery, kindness, and fairness through interactive storytelling and games. Students aged 9–11 were guided through a deeper discussion of Sikh identity and the significance of articles of faith, including interactive role-play on real-world scenarios such as being asked to remove a kara. Older youth (ages 12–21) participated in workshops on fairness, justice, and advocacy, with case studies on landmark WSO legal victories such as *Multani v. Commission scolaire Marguerite-Bourgeoys* and *Baltej Singh Dhillon's* precedent-setting case. These sessions encouraged students to reflect on their identity, share experiences, and build the confidence to speak up. Following the workshops, students completed the surveys in a supportive environment.



Gubaj Singh Multani

As in past years, multiple variables were analyzed to explore correlations between student demographics, articles of faith, and experiences of bullying. Upon completion, data was cleansed and analyzed using standard survey analysis techniques. All respondents were required to have parental consent, and responses were screened regularly to identify potential safeguarding concerns.

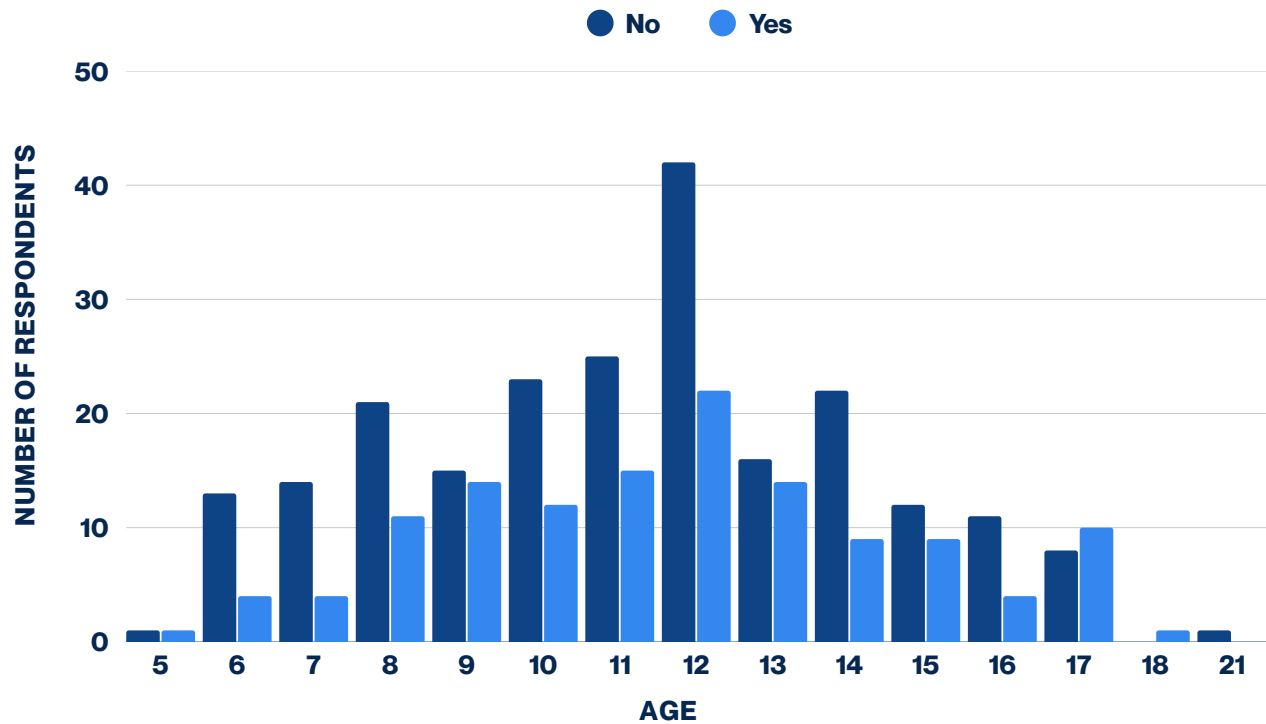
FIGURE 1: RESPONDENT'S CITY OF RESIDENCE



AGE

Students ranged from ages 5–21 (average 12). Bullying prevalence rises with age: ≤12 years: 34.0% vs >12 years: 40.2%.

FIGURE 2: AGE DISTRIBUTION AND EXPERIENCE OF BULLYING



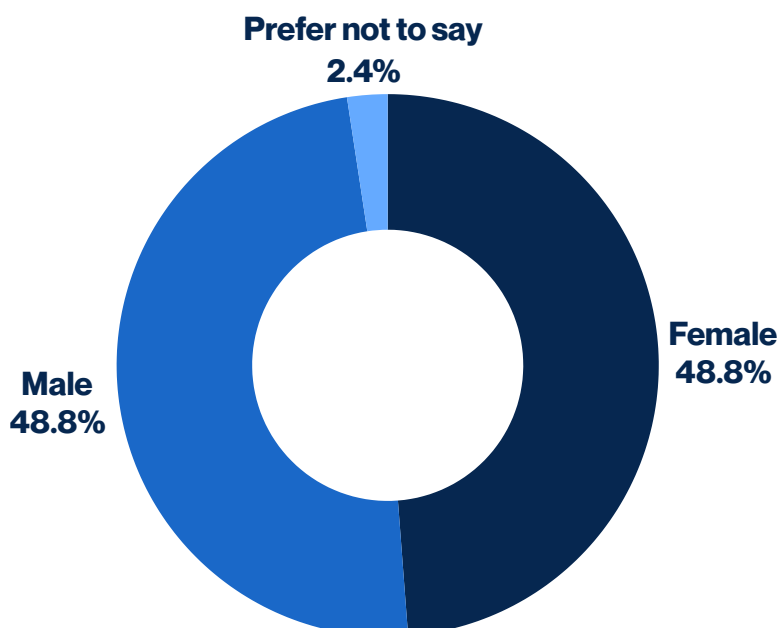
GENDER

Of the 380 respondents, 48.95% (186) identified as male, 48.68% (185) as female, and 2.37% preferred not to say. Bullying prevalence was similar by gender, with ~30% of male students and ~33% of female students reporting bullying.



“I’m the only girl with a keski in my class. I’m proud of it, but I wish I didn’t have to explain it every week.” — Grade 7, Mississauga

FIGURE 3: GENDER DISTRIBUTION

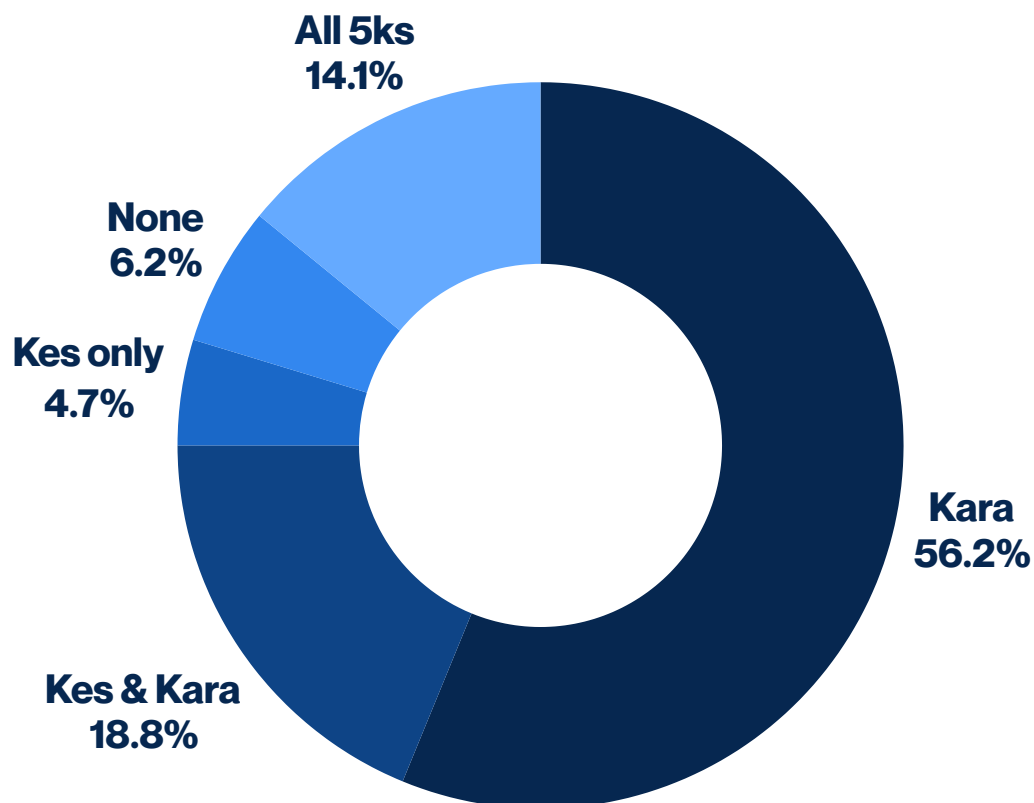


ARTICLES OF FAITH

Initiated and practicing Sikhs are identifiable through the five Sikh articles of faith. Many Sikh students, even if not initiated, choose to keep some or all of these articles. Sikh articles of faith include **kesh (uncut hair)**, **dastaar/patka (turban)**, **kara (metal bracelet)**, **kirpan**, and **kanga (comb)**; **kachhera (undergarment)** was excluded because it is not externally visible.

The survey results show the most commonly worn article was the kara (328 students), followed by kesh (293 students), dastaar/patka (216 students), kanga (105 students), and kirpan (89 students).

FIGURE 4: DISTRIBUTION OF ARTICLES OF FAITH AMONGST STUDENTS



SURVEY RESULTS

Of the students surveyed, 34.47% reported being bullied because of their Sikh identity. This represents an increase from 26.9% in 2016 and indicates that Sikh students continue to experience disproportionately high rates of identity-based bullying.

Bullying type, responsible party, and frequency.

TABLE 1: NATURE OF BULLYING (BULLIED STUDENTS; MULTIPLE RESPONSES ALLOWED)

Nature of Bullying	Total Count
Name-calling	56
Touching Dastaar/Patka/Kesh (uncut hair)	12
Name-calling + Touching	8
Physical hitting	7
Name-calling+Physical+Touching	5
Threats	5

TABLE 2: WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE? (BULLIED STUDENTS; MULTIPLE RESPONSES ALLOWED)

Who was responsible?	Total Count
Student	87
Teacher	6
Student & Teacher	5

TABLE 3: HOW OFTEN DID THIS HAPPEN? (BULLIED STUDENTS; SINGLE RESPONSE)

How often?	Total Count
Once or Twice	63
Quite a Few Times	29
All the time	12
Ongoing	6

Interference with dastaar/patka/kesh and physical hitting track with lower resolution and less school action than name-calling alone.

To better understand the dynamics behind this bullying, we examined variables such as age, gender, and visibility of articles of faith. Students were asked not only whether they had ever been bullied based on their Sikh identity, but also how often it happened, what form it took, and whether reporting it to school staff resulted in meaningful support.



“Nothing was done. Sikhs are often left out of special opportunities... the teachers didn’t understand the religion.” — Secondary student, Mississauga

ARTICLES OF FAITH

The visibility of Sikh identity markers appears to play a strong role in whether students experience bullying. Students who wore visible articles of faith, such as the dastaar/patka (turban) or kirpan, reported bullying at a high rate (38%). Students wearing kara only—less visible in day-to-day interaction—reported ~39%. In comparison, students who kept kesh (uncut hair) but did not wear a dastaar/patka (turban) reported bullying at 31%, while students who did not wear any articles of faith reported bullying at 24%.



“My dastaar feels like a crown. Some days people stare, but most days it reminds me I’m brave.”
— Grade 6, Brampton

TABLE 4 : BULLYING RESPONSE DISTRIBUTION

	Total	Yes (Count)	Yes %
Visible article of faith (dastaar/patka (turban), kirpan, etc.)	219	84	38%
Kesh (uncut hair)	82	25	31%
No visible articles (Kara yes)	46	18	39%
None	17	4	24%

While these statistics point to a strong correlation between visibility and bullying, the numbers suggest that visibility alone may not be the direct cause. The prevalence of bullying also appears to increase with the number of articles of faith. For example, students reporting wearing at least three articles of faith reported a 41.7% rate of bullying while those wearing only one article of faith reported a bullying rate of 32.9%. These contrasts are observational but indicate where targeted support matters most.

PARENTS/TEACHERS/STAFF

Students were also asked about their responses to bullying and whether they felt supported by adults. The following table outlines how students attempted to address their experiences:

TABLE 5: BULLYING REMEDIATION TECHNIQUES

What did you do to try to solve the bullying problem?	Frequency	Percentage
I did not tell anyone about this problem	27	16%
I told a teacher, guidance counselor or principal about the problem	70	43%
I tried to talk to the person(s) responsible myself	50	31%
I told my parents/guardian	58	36%
Retaliated	33	20%

A large majority (~83%) reported incidents to school staff—an improvement from 2016. However, perceived effectiveness varied: ~42% felt schools were not at all helpful, ~22% found them very helpful, and ~16% said help came only after a parent intervened. This points to inconsistent implementation rather than a lack of reporting.



“It got resolved after the principal called home and the teacher addressed the class. I wish they’d done it sooner.” — Grade 7, Peel

SCHOOL RESPONSE EFFECTIVENESS/ TECHNIQUES

TABLE 6: SCHOOL RESPONSE EFFECTIVENESS (STUDENT-REPORTED OUTCOMES)

Did the school help in solving the bullying?	Frequency	Percentage
The school was helpful after a parent stepped in	11/68	16%
The school was not at all helpful in solving this problem	64/154	42%
Yes, the school was very helpful in solving this problem	34/154	22%

While nearly a quarter reported very helpful responses, the largest group (~42%) reported not helpful. A further ~16% saw action only after parental involvement, suggesting responses can be reactive rather than proactive.

How did the school help?	Frequency	Percentage
Nothing has been done	68	44%
They spoke to the person responsible	56	36%
Disciplined the person responsible	26	17%
They spoke to the class as a whole	27	17%

Reported techniques varied. In ~44% of cases, students said nothing was done. Where action occurred, it most often involved speaking to the person responsible (~36%), followed by discipline (~17%) and addressing the class (~17%).

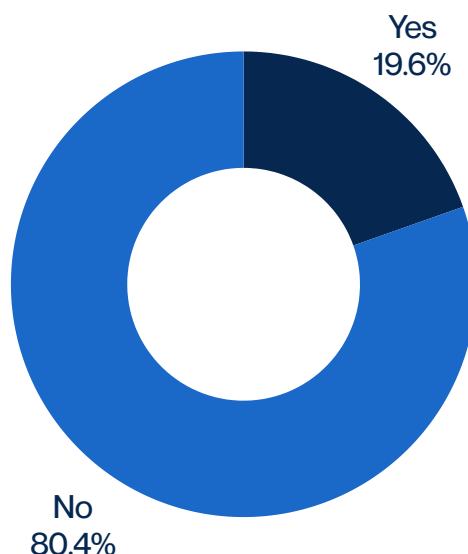
COMMENTARY

The 2025 results reinforce that while articles of faith increase visibility and can raise the likelihood of bullying, they are not the sole cause. Students without visible identifiers still reported notable levels of harassment, which reflects broader racial, cultural, and linguistic bias. The persistence of high bullying rates suggests that the root causes are tied to ignorance, xenophobia, and systemic failures in school response mechanisms, rather than to student identity markers alone.

DISCOMFORT

Beyond repeated acts that qualify as overt bullying, many Sikh students also reported a general sense of discomfort in their school environment. These experiences often stemmed from microaggressions, stereotyping, or casual remarks rooted in a lack of awareness of Sikh practices. 19% of students reported feeling uncomfortable at school specifically because of their Sikh identity.³ This figure is slightly higher than the 13.3% recorded in 2016, though still lower than the 20% reported in 2011. The persistence of this issue suggests that while overt bullying may have been addressed to some degree, subtle forms of exclusion and ignorance remain embedded in the school experience.

FIGURE 5: HAVE YOU EVER FELT UNCOMFORTABLE AT SCHOOL BECAUSE OF YOUR SIKH IDENTITY?



When asked why they felt uncomfortable, students most frequently cited being treated differently (67%), often in ways that may not always appear as outright hostility but still contributed to feelings of alienation. For instance, one student shared that “kids talk behind your back,” while another recalled being deliberately excluded through acts like “taking my chair and tripping me.” These incidents highlight how everyday acts of exclusion create an ongoing sense of isolation.



“They kept mispronouncing my name, then said it was ‘too hard’ and gave me a nickname I didn’t choose.” — Grade 9, Vaughan

³ **Top reasons:** treated differently (59 mentions), mispronounced name (25), called names (15), told not to wear an article of faith (10). These everyday exclusions often precede or accompany overt bullying.

Another 28% of students pointed to the mispronunciation or mockery of their names as a source of discomfort. As one student recounted, “they say my name in a very Indian accent,” illustrating how cultural identity becomes a point of ridicule. Similarly, about 17% of students reported being directly called names, while 11% were told not to wear their articles of faith. These experiences show that discomfort is not only linked to visible Sikh markers like the kara or dastaar/patka (turban) but also extends to language, gendered expectations, and cultural difference. One girl expressed how “people make fun of me for my body hair or really long hair,” underscoring that Sikh identity can intersect with broader issues of gender-based teasing.

In some cases, discomfort escalated into physical acts, with one student recalling, “he took my kara off and threw it,” and another noting, “they slapped me and said bad things.” These experiences highlight how microaggressions and “small” incidents can quickly cross into overt bullying. Importantly, some students also perceived a lack of urgency from their schools in addressing these matters, with one remarking, “they only care if it’s a really big problem.” Together, these findings emphasize that even when behavior falls short of outright bullying, its effect is significant.

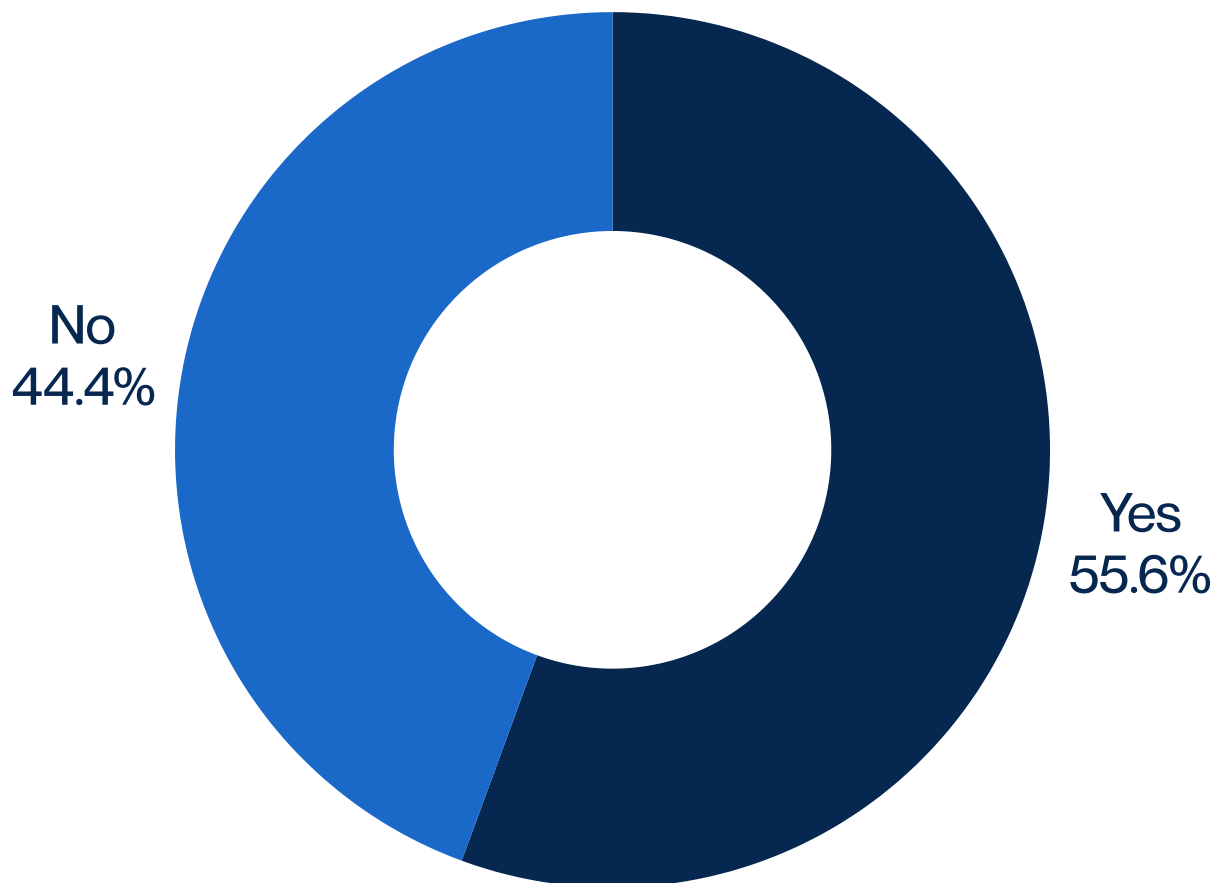
TABLE 8: BULLYING TECHNIQUES

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
Told not to wear an Article of Faith	10	11%
Mispronounced name	25	28%
Called names	15	17%
Treated differently	59	67%

ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL)

The survey also explored students' experiences with the English as a Second Language (ESL) program. In 2025, 13% of students (50/380) reported being placed in ESL classes, despite only 4% (14/380) saying they were not comfortable reading, writing, or speaking in English. Among those who took ESL, 66% (33/50) found the program effective.

FIGURE 6: DID YOU FIND ESL TO BE EFFECTIVE?



This finding suggests a recurring concern raised in earlier surveys: ESL placement may not always reflect actual language needs. For many Sikh students, fluency in English is well established, yet assumptions about cultural or linguistic backgrounds seem to influence placement. Interestingly, more than half of students (58%) reported feeling comfortable speaking Punjabi at school, demonstrating the strength of bilingual identity. However, the decline in ESL effectiveness compared to 2016 (when 88% found it helpful) raises questions about whether resources are being directed toward those who genuinely need them. In some cases, ESL placement may not align with language need, potentially reinforcing assumptions about Sikh/Punjabi-speaking students rather than providing targeted support.

SIKH IDENTITY IN THE CLASSROOM

Students were also asked whether any tenants of the Sikh faith or identity was taught or discussed in their classrooms. In 2025, 55% reported that Sikhi (the Sikh faith) was discussed, with higher engagement in the Peel District School Board, where 68% confirmed such discussions. Of the 252 PDSB students who took this survey, 57% reported learning about Sikhi in class, suggesting that efforts within Peel schools to acknowledge diversity have expanded since 2016. Students who learned about Sikhi at school reported 33% bullying versus 40% where Sikhi was not taught.

Despite these improvements, perceptions of respect remain mixed. Only 39% of students felt that Sikhs were respected in their schools, while others indicated that teachers and peers were respectful but lacked a true understanding of Sikh practices. A smaller yet significant group reported feeling unsafe traveling to or from school because of their Sikh identity, a reminder that hostility toward Sikh students extends beyond classroom walls.

Students linked recognition to pride: “my dastaar is a crown,” and “I like being different and telling people about Sikhi.” When visibility meets acceptance, confidence grows.

At the same time, 66% of students reported they would like someone to visit their school to talk about the Sikh faith. This reflects both a desire for broader awareness and an acknowledgment that Sikh students themselves cannot always bear the burden of explaining their practices to peers. The consistent pattern across surveys (2011, 2016, 2025) suggests that schools have an important role to play in combating ignorance.



“People stare at me because of my dastaar (turban).” — Grade 5 student, Brampton

COMPARISON WITH 2016 SURVEY RESULTS

We compare these results with the 2016 bullying survey also conducted by the WSO. In that instance, 332 students were surveyed, and 26.9% reported being bullied because of their Sikh identity, compared to 34.47% in 2025. This represents an increase in the prevalence of bullying since the last report. Notably, students who wore visible articles of faith reported a bullying rate of 34% in 2016, whereas this year the rate rose to 38%. While year-to-year changes are modest, visible markers remain central to targeting risk.

School response quality declined: very helpful fell from 51% (2016) to ~22% (2025), while not helpful rose from 39% to ~42%—despite higher reporting (57% → ~83%).

The ESL program also shows shifting patterns. In 2016, 88% of students who had taken ESL found it helpful, compared to only 66% in 2025. Additionally, while just 3.3% of students in 2016 reported being uncomfortable with reading, writing, or speaking English, this rose slightly to 4% in 2025. At the same time, 13% of students in 2025 were placed in ESL programs, despite most reporting fluency in English. This suggests that misplacement in ESL persists, potentially reinforcing stereotypes about Sikh and Punjabi-speaking students rather than addressing genuine learning needs.

In terms of classroom representation, the teaching about the Sikh faith has increased significantly. In 2016, only 37% of students reported that the Sikh faith was discussed in their classroom, whereas in 2025 this number rose to 55%, with particularly strong progress in the Peel District School Board. Yet, despite this improvement in representation, only 39% of students in 2025 felt that Sikhs were respected in their schools. This disconnect between discussion and respect suggests that while schools are making strides toward inclusion, these efforts are not always translating into meaningful understanding or acceptance.

Taken together, these comparisons reveal that while some progress has been made since 2016—particularly in the visibility of the Sikh faith within the classroom—bullying itself has become more common, and the effectiveness of school responses appears to have declined.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this report show that there is a real need for schools in Ontario to make changes that better support Sikh students. One of the biggest takeaways is the importance of teaching students about the Sikh faith from a young age. While some students reported their schools have touched on Sikh history and traditions, almost 30% shared that their school doesn't really understand Sikh identity. Where the Sikh faith is taught, bullying is 33% vs 40% where it is not.

Many also reported they would benefit from having someone from the community come into their classroom to explain what Sikh identity means and answer questions directly. Schools already recognize Sikh Heritage Month and sometimes celebrate religious holidays, but these moments could be used more effectively to actually educate students. Starting this learning early helps prevent Sikh identity from being singled out or misunderstood, and instead makes it something that everyone feels comfortable with and respects.

Sikh Student Associations (SSAs). Many Ontario high school students—especially in Peel—report that their schools already host an SSA, typically student-led with support from a staff advisor. SSAs provide safe, identity-affirming spaces to share experiences, connect with culture, and reduce isolation following bias or bullying. Formal recognition, a designated staff advisor, and modest operational resources (e.g., meeting space, small budgets, access to speakers) would strengthen SSAs and expand their contribution to a positive school climate.

Implementing these recommendations will allow schools to proactively engage with Sikh students facing bullying at alarming rates. These steps strengthen the foundation for safe and inclusive learning environments. In doing so, Sikh students are supported, respected, and empowered.

1. Adopt a Board-Wide Sikh Student Success Strategy

School boards should adopt a comprehensive Sikh Student Success Strategy that parallels existing initiatives for other equity-seeking student populations. This strategy would provide a framework for:

- Setting measurable goals around academic achievement, student well-being, and safety.
- Establishing accountability mechanisms such as annual reporting and board-level oversight.
- Explicitly naming anti-Sikh hate as a systemic issue that requires targeted action.
- Board can ensure that resources are allocated and progress can be monitored transparently, rather than relying on ad hoc measures.

2. Strike a Sikh Student Success Task Force

School boards with significant Sikh populations should convene a Sikh Student Success Task Force, chaired by a Superintendent and reporting directly to the Director of Education. The Task Force would:

- Meet regularly to review emerging issues facing Sikh students.
- Provide twice-yearly public updates on progress against stated objectives.
- Include diverse stakeholders such as educators, trustees, parents, community advocates, and students.

This structure ensures accountability at the highest levels of leadership and positions Sikh student success as a matter of system-wide priority.

3. Create a Sikh Student Advisory Council (SSAC)

Mirroring the successful model of Black Student Advisory Councils and other similar bodies, the Board should establish a Sikh Student Advisory Council. This body would:

- Give Sikh youth a direct voice in decision-making and policy development.
- Serve as a safe forum to share lived experiences of bullying, exclusion, or discrimination.
- Build leadership capacity among Sikh students and strengthen their sense of agency within the school system.

4. Host Bi-Annual Sikh Student Roundtables

School boards should host bi-annual roundtables that convene Sikh Student Associations (SSAs) from across Peel schools. These gatherings would:

- Encourage peer-to-peer leadership and coalition-building.
- Provide a platform for Sikh students to highlight issues such as bullying, isolation, and misrepresentation in curriculum.
- Offer Board staff the opportunity to respond directly and in real time to student concerns.

5. Create and Publish Sikh Educational Resources

School boards should prioritize the creation or updating of Sikh educational resources in close collaboration with WSO and other community partners. This work should include:

- Expanding curricular content to include Sikh history in Canada, the Guru Nanak Jahaz (Komagata Maru), contributions of Sikhs in fields such as military service, politics, and medicine, as well as contemporary issues like anti-Sikh hate.
- Making resources widely accessible to all educators through board platforms.

6. Mandate Anti-Sikh Hate & Faith Accommodation Training

The Board should implement a mandatory professional learning module for all staff on anti-Sikh hate, faith accommodations, and cultural literacy. Key features include:

- Training delivered in collaboration with recognized Sikh organizations.
- Content covering legal obligations under the Ontario Human Rights Code and Charter rights.
- Practical guidance on issues such as accommodating religious attire, dietary needs, and Sikh practices.

7. Establish a Sikh Community Advisory Council

A Sikh Community Advisory Council should be formally established to provide ongoing partnership and oversight. This Council would:

- Bring together parents, gurdwara leaders, advocacy organizations, and educators.
- Act as a standing advisory group to the Equity Department and Superintendent Task Force.
- Ensure continuous alignment between board policy and community expectations.

8. Enhance Outreach to Sikh Parents

School boards should prioritize building stronger relationships with Sikh parents and guardians by:

- Providing targeted outreach through the Parent Involvement Committee.
- Offering translated materials in Punjabi to reduce language barriers.
- Hosting town halls and workshops in partnership with local gurdwaras to ensure broad accessibility.

9. Expand and Coordinate Sikh Heritage Month Programming

Currently, Sikh Heritage Month programming is inconsistent across schools. School boards should:

- Develop a centralized strategy and toolkit to ensure every school has the resources and guidance to mark the month in meaningful ways.
- Highlight Sikh voices, role models, and contributions across diverse subject areas.
- Allocate specific funding and staffing to support equity in programming across schools.
- This helps normalize Sikh visibility in schools and builds pride among students.

10. Address Practical Needs such as Patka Box Access

Finally school boards must address everyday, practical needs of Sikh students. For example:

- Schools should be equipped with Patka Boxes or equivalent resources to help students quickly fix their head coverings if they become loose during the day.
- Staff should be trained in how to support Sikh children in these situations respectfully.

