

Religious minority sees harassment in schools

By [Ty Tagami](#)

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It started with taunts and touches. Classmates would point at Japjee Singh's turban and call him "Osama." Or they'd try to pull it off his head.

That was in second grade, soon after the boy's family immigrated from India to Dunwoody.

Despite numerous complaints over six years to school officials, the boy and his family say, the DeKalb County School District failed to stop the harassment. Instead, it escalated, culminating in serious injury. The school system's pledge to do better came only after the start of a federal investigation.

Japjee's supporters say that during the years of abuse he began to fear school, and started spending long hours alone in his bedroom.

Finally, according to the family, the verbal attacks turned violent: on Oct. 4, 2012, outside the lunchroom at [Peachtree Charter Middle School](#), a group of boys surrounded Japjee in the hallway as one of them beat him, punching him a half dozen times and breaking his nose. Japjee said he suffered a deviated septum and still has breathing problems despite two surgeries.

Later, Japjee asked the boy why he had attacked him. "Because I felt like it," he said the boy responded.

DeKalb has the second-highest discipline rate for bullying among metro Atlanta school districts, according to an analysis of data from the [Georgia Department of Education](#). The district reported 629 cases during the 2013-14 school year, or more than six per thousand students. By comparison, Gwinnett County Public Schools had fewer than two cases per thousand. Atlanta Public Schools topped the list with nine per thousand.

The state average was four cases per thousand students. Those numbers beg the question, though: Is bullying rampant in DeKalb or is the district simply better at reporting?

A state-sponsored survey suggests DeKalb has a low rate of bullying. The "Georgia Student Health Survey II" for the 2013-14 school year had 13.9 percent of responding parents in DeKalb saying their sixth- through 12th-graders had been bullied in the past 30 days. That was slightly above the rates in Fulton and Gwinnett counties but below that of the Cobb, Clayton, Marietta, Decatur and Atlanta school districts. It was also below the state rate of 15.3 percent. DeKalb had a relatively small proportion of survey respondents, though.

Whatever the case, Japjee's father, Tejinder Singh, was upset about the district's response to his son's injury. He felt sick when he was called to the school and found Japjee covered in blood. That feeling simmered into frustration, he said, when he realized that no one had called 911, leaving his son to sit injured in the office. He said he tried to file a police report with an outside agency but was directed back to the school officer who he said had discouraged a report.

"Nobody listening to us," Tejinder Singh said in accented English. "I feel really bad because they're not following rule and regulation."

School officials would not discuss the case nor the students involved, citing federal privacy law. But they said DeKalb was taking bullying and discrimination seriously at the time that Japjee was injured.

Japjee and his supporters disagree. The incident led to the involvement of a national advocacy group for Sikhs.

The group says the school district blamed Japjee for starting the fight and says that was just the latest incident in a history of neglect of this case.

“We seriously dispute the school district’s findings,” said Kaur, the coalition attorney. “He was attacked by a kid who’d been bullying him since elementary school.” After weeks of talks, the coalition filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Justice. That got DeKalb’s attention.

Sikhism originated in the Punjab region of South Asia in the 15th century. The turban, previously reserved for nobility, came to represent for Sikhs the noble values of their religion, such as a commitment to equality. For many Americans, though, it also inspires fear and prejudice.

The [Sikh Coalition](#) says students within the religion, especially males who are expected to wear the turban as a religious requirement, are often bullied, and the coalition blames ignorance and fear of foreigners: Tormentors think turbaned Sikhs were involved in the 9/11 terrorist attacks, it says, and mistake Sikhs for members of al-Qaida or the Taliban.

“The Sikh community is afraid of the ‘t’ word — terrorism,” said Gurjot Kaur, a coalition attorney.

The U.S. Justice Department looked into Japjee’s claims, but DeKalb officials quickly negotiated a May 2013 agreement to review and revise bullying and harassment policies and procedures, and also to separate Japjee from unidentified “offending” students. The school district admitted no wrongdoing, and any disciplinary records, including those involving Japjee’s broken nose, are sealed.

“They have now recognized that if they receive a bullying complaint, they can’t just look the other way,” Kaur said.

The [U.S. Attorney's Office in Atlanta](#) wouldn't comment about its investigation but said this is its first settlement involving Sikhs and school bullying. A statement from U.S. Attorney Sally Quillian Yates said her agency was committed to civil rights and "will respond to any situations where bullying or harassment prevents our citizens from enjoying their right to education or any other civil liberty."

Quentin Fretwell, an official with DeKalb’s safe schools program, said the resolution requires “further enhancements to what we already had in place” and said DeKalb has long been a leader on bullying policy. “We took the opportunity to say this is so important let’s not just be compliant, let’s be on the cutting edge here,” he said.

Japjee's family isn't the first in DeKalb to complain about bullying. In 2009, [Jaheem Herrera, an 11 year-old DeKalb boy, hanged himself](#) after he was reportedly tormented when he went to school with a pink book bag. School officials said later that an investigation had found no evidence that Jaheem was bullied, a finding his parents denounced. The next year, the Georgia General Assembly mandated that school employees report suspected bullying to principals, and compelled school districts to adopt [policies for notifying parents](#).

A second agreement between DeKalb and the U.S. Attorney’s Office was signed in November. It requires training on religious and national origin harassment for all 101,000 students and all staffers who interact with them. It also mandates easier access to complaint forms, in multiple languages. And in time, there should be evidence about the district’s response to bullying.

For three school years starting in January, DeKalb must give the federal government annual summaries of all complaints about discipline related to allegations or incidents of bullying or harassment, plus copies of all complaints from parents who don't speak English well and say they couldn't get information about harassment, bullying or discipline policies.

"There's a lot of work that still needs to be done. These are baby steps," Japjee said. DeKalb's new resolution recognizes the problem, he said. "Now it's on how they enact it."

The percent of parents who said their sixth- through 12th-grade students had been bullied in the past 30 days, in the 2013-14 Georgia Student Health Survey II.

Marietta City 15.9%

Clayton County 15.5%

State of Georgia 15.3%

Cobb County 14.8%

DeKalb County 13.9%

Fulton County 13.5%

Gwinnett County 13.3%

Bullying incidents reported to Georgia Department of Education in 2013-14, as a percent of total enrollment.

Atlanta Public Schools 0.93%

DeKalb County 0.63%

Cobb County 0.48%

Clayton County 0.42%

State of Georgia 0.41%

Fulton County 0.34%

Gwinnett County 0.19%

Marietta City 0.16%

Decatur City 0.07%