SENATE RESOLUTION No. 108

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

220th LEGISLATURE

INTRODUCED JANUARY 26, 2023

Sponsored by:
Senator  LINDA R. GREENSTEIN
District 14 (Mercer and Middlesex)
Senator  M. TERESA RUIZ
District 29 (Essex)

Co-Sponsored by:
Senators Diegnan, Singleton, Thompson, Burgess, Lagana and Gopal

SYNOPSIS
Urges incorporation of Sikhism instruction into social studies curriculum.

CURRENT VERSION OF TEXT
As introduced.
A Senate Resolution urging the State Board of Education to require school districts to incorporate Sikhism instruction into the social studies curriculum and development of certain course materials.

WHEREAS, The cultural and intellectual diversity of the State of New Jersey is a source of strength and inspiration for its citizens; and

WHEREAS, The Sikh community continues to play an integral, though often overlooked, role in strengthening the religious, social, and political fabric of this State; and

WHEREAS, Founded by Guru Nanak in the Punjab region of India during the 15th century, the Sikh community began immigrating to the United States in the late 1800s and has played an important role in developing this country and the State of New Jersey and enriching American culture, history, economy, and diversity; and

WHEREAS, The Sikh monotheistic tradition teaches its adherents to practice the universal principles of truthful living, service to humanity, devotion to God, and the belief that every person, regardless of race, gender, sex, or creed, is equal before God; and

WHEREAS, Sikhism is the world’s fifth largest religion with nearly 30 million adherents, roughly 1,000,000 of whom call the United States home; and

WHEREAS, New Jersey is home to one of the largest populations of Sikh Americans in the United States, with about 100,000 Sikh Americans living in the State; and

WHEREAS, Some of the most notable Sikh Americans live in, and contribute to, the State, including former Attorney General Gurbir Grewal and City of Hoboken Mayor Ravinder Bhalla, and the Sikh community has made positive social, cultural, economic, and political contributions to New Jersey; and

WHEREAS, Despite their contributions to society, Sikhs continue to experience discrimination and hate, often by individuals who are unaware of the beliefs and practices of the faith; and

WHEREAS, Sikhism is a distinct religion, different from Hinduism and Islam, with a unique set of beliefs and practices whereby only followers of this religion wear a turban as a symbol of the faith and commitment to equality and justice; and

WHEREAS, Cultural and religious illiteracy, coupled with a distinct visible identity in the form of a turban, has led to xenophobic violence against Sikhs since their arrival in this country more than a century ago; and

WHEREAS, Sikh Americans have been particularly vulnerable to anti-Muslim sentiment and xenophobic violence after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 because of their appearance; and

WHEREAS, During the COVID-19 pandemic, racist and discriminatory attacks have risen against Asian communities, including Sikhs, a majority of which are attributed to lack of knowledge; and
WHEREAS, The lack of culture and history curriculum on Sikhism in mainstream courses at public schools has perpetuated violence, intolerance, and bullying against children who practice the religion; and

WHEREAS, Sikh children disproportionately experience school bullying, with estimates indicating that over 50 percent of all Sikh children, and roughly 67 percent of turbaned-Sikhs, endure physical or verbal abuse while at school; and

WHEREAS, It is important for New Jersey to ensure that our younger generations are taught to be more empathetic and inclusive towards other religions and cultures; and

WHEREAS, On January 18, 2022, Governor Murphy signed P.L.2021, c.416 (C.18A:35-4.44), requiring school districts to incorporate instruction on the history and contributions of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, many of whom include Sikhs, within the curriculum for grades kindergarten through 12 as part of a school district’s implementation of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards in Social Studies; and

WHEREAS, On the same day, Governor Murphy also signed P.L.2021, c.410 (C.18A:4-51 et seq.), establishing the Commission on Asian American Heritage within the Department of Education, which is tasked with developing curriculum guidelines for the inclusion of Asian and Asian American history, culture, and heritage, into the social studies curriculum; and

WHEREAS, The Commission on Asian American Heritage is legislatively required to meet with county and local school officials to assist in the planning, coordination, and modification of courses relating to the culture, history, and heritage of people of Asian or Asian American descent; and

WHEREAS, The State has imposed many requirements concerning the school district curriculum, which burden the schools and increase the workload on students. Building on prior legislation, explicitly incorporating Sikhism instruction into the social studies curriculum will decrease this burden while ensuring that students receive critical instruction and gain understanding of the world’s fifth largest religion; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the Senate of the State of New Jersey:

1. The Senate of the State of New Jersey urges the State Board of Education to require school districts to incorporate Sikhism instruction in the existing social studies curriculum for elementary and secondary public school students.

2. This House further urges the Commission on Asian American Heritage to coordinate with county and local school officials to develop course material, of at least one chapter, on Sikh history and
culture to be incorporated within each school district’s social studies curriculum.

3. Copies of this resolution, as filed with the Secretary of State, shall be transmitted by the Secretary of the Senate to the Sikh Youth Alliance Inc., each member of the New Jersey State Board of Education, each member of the Commission on Asian American Heritage, the President of the New Jersey Conference of Mayors, and the Executive Director of the New Jersey School Boards Association.

STATEMENT

This Senate resolution urges the State Board of Education to require school districts to incorporate Sikhism instruction into the existing social studies curriculum and the Commission on Asian American Heritage to coordinate with local school officials to develop relevant course material.

Sikhism is currently the world’s fifth largest religion with roughly 30 million adherents worldwide, including approximately 1,000,000 Sikhs in the United States and 100,000 living in the State. Founded in the 15th century in the Punjab region of India, Sikhism is a monotheistic religion that teaches the fundamental principles of truthful living, service to humanity, and devotion to God. Sikhs believe that every person, regardless of race, gender, or sex is equal before God.

Acting on these basic principles, Sikhs are known to make lasting and meaningful social contributions wherever they reside, including within the State of New Jersey. Notable Sikhs contributing to the State include former Attorney General Gurbir Grewal and City of Hoboken Mayor Ravinder Bhalla.

Although Sikhs have made immense contributions throughout history and within the State, they have long faced oppression and discrimination throughout India and the rest of the world. Following the September 11th terrorist attacks, anti-Sikh bigotry increased dramatically through the United States, as many people erroneously associated the Sikh’s uncut beards and traditional turbans with religious Islamic radicals. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Sikhs have experienced violence as part of the rising attacks against Asian communities. Sikh students endure school bullying and hate crime assaults at a higher rate than many of their classmates. However, by refusing to respond with hate or violence, the Sikh community continues to promote love and peace in the face of discrimination.

The Senate recognizes the importance of educating its diverse residents and students to prevent violence, intolerance, and bullying. Building on recent legislative enactments, this resolution
aims to combat a misunderstanding of Sikhism by urging the State Board of Education to include the religion within the curriculum for all students in elementary and secondary public schools and requiring the Commission on Asian American Heritage to work with local school officials in the creation of Sikhism instruction materials.