

Oregon lawmakers may repeal ban on teachers' classroom religious garb: A law from an anti-Catholic era

News in the [January 12, 2010](#) issue

Teachers in Oregon are likely to win the right to wear religious clothing such as turbans, yarmulkes and headscarves in public schools when state lawmakers convene in February, elected officials say.

Oregon's relatively unusual prohibition on teachers' religious garb dates to a shameful anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic period in state history and is overdue to be changed, said state House Speaker Dave Hunt.

Hunt plans to introduce a bill to repeal the 1923 law and said he is optimistic it will pass, given the broad spectrum of Christians, Jews, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs who support the change.

State labor commissioner Brad Avakian and Oregon schools superintendent Susan Castillo recently sent every lawmaker a letter urging them to end the ban on religious dress for teachers.

The 86-year-old law has not been tested in court since school officials in Eugene won a 1986 Oregon Supreme Court case that upheld its firing of a Sikh teacher for wearing a turban as the faith requires.

Few Oregonians were aware that the state had such a ban—one of only three in the nation—until lawmakers passed a law earlier this year allowing all workers except teachers to wear religious dress at work in most instances.

The 1923 law on teacher dress was passed when Kaspar K. Kubli, an open supporter of the Ku Klux Klan, presided as speaker of the Oregon House. The law was included in the Alien Property Act of 1923, which prohibited Japanese Americans from owning property in Oregon, and was designed to prevent nuns and priests from wearing their habits or vestments in classrooms.

Hunt said the old law has a modern-day impact. Some Muslims and Sikhs have been told in recent years that they can't apply for teaching jobs or can teach only if they remove their head coverings, he said.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon, which has long supported the ban on teachers' wearing of religious clothing, said the legislature should not end it without enacting additional protections for Oregon students.

"We are urging the legislature not to rush," said David Fidanque, executive director of the state ACLU. "Just repealing the statute could cause real problems in maintaining the religious neutrality of schools in Oregon." *-Religion News Service*