A Sikh American Perspective on Equal Opportunity

Testimony of:
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I offer gratitude to Chairwoman Gelser and all members of the Education Committee for convening this hearing and also for the opportunity to submit testimony for the record. My name is Sat Hanuman Singh Khalsa. By way of background, I live in Portland, Oregon and am a Lead Security Officer for the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), an agency of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

I am here today as a private citizen and on behalf of the Sikh American community as the Northwest Regional Director of the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF), as well as our partner organizations The Sikh Coalition and UNITED SIKHS.

As a Sikh American, I support an immediate repeal of ORS 342.650. This unjust law shuts the door of equal opportunity in the face of observant Sikhs, Muslims, Jews, and others who wear religious dress in adherence to faith.

I am a living testament to the American promise of equal opportunity, but this law is a throwback to the separate but equal doctrine. As a Sikh, my turban is as integral to my identity as the color of my skin. If I were a teacher, I could not, as required by this law, leave my turban at home to go to work.

The Sikh religion was founded in South Asia over five centuries ago and currently draws more than 25 million adherents throughout the world. The Pew Survey estimates there to be approximately 700,000 Sikhs living in the United States. Observant Sikhs are distinguished by turbans and uncut hair and have a reputation for being dedicated to the cause of social justice. Our religion teaches us that all human beings are created equal. The Sikh belief in human equality foreshadowed the U.S. Constitution by several centuries. In many ways, at least ideologically speaking, Sikhs are among the most American of Americans. Even still, because of the way we look, Sikh Americans have ironically suffered widespread hate crimes, workplace discrimination, and school bullying in the post-9/11 environment.

In a landmark 1923 Supreme Court case entitled United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind, an Oregonian Sikh was denied the right to become a naturalized citizen of the United States because he was deemed not to be a “white person” within the meaning of the law. Not surprisingly, around the same time, sympathizers of the Ku Klux Klan in the Oregon legislature enacted the law that would ultimately become ORS 342.650.

In our lifetimes, this law continues to impact the lives of teachers in Oregon. A Sikh woman—Karta Kaur Khalsa—was forced to leave Oregon after being denied the right to teach in 1986. There are several Muslim women who have also been affected by this discriminatory legislation, three of whom are here today.
I would hazard a guess to say that all of us in this room today teach our children to respect the diversity of our country, and that we all remember the history of our great nation, a nation that was founded at least in part by individuals who sought freedom of religion. I must ask you a simple question – how can we teach our children to respect diversity and difference on the street, but not in the classroom? How can the Oregon public school system teach its students about freedom, justice and equality, if it forces teachers who wear religious garb to abandon that for their employment? How can we tell our teenagers to show kindness to a fellow student that does not look like them, but not have diversity in our teacher workforce?

Recently, the Eugene School District reached its stated goal to increase the representation of minority teachers from 6 percent to 10 percent of the licensed staff to better represent the diversity of the classroom\(^1\). Hate and bias crimes are a serious problem for Sikh, Jewish, and Muslim communities, and this hatred stems from a lack of understanding and acceptance. By ratifying a law that a Sikh with a turban cannot teach in the public school system, Oregon is sending a clear message that certain citizens are second-class and deserve to be treated as such. Is it not a good thing to have our children experience and recognize the diversity of people, cultures, and traditions that make up the fabric of American life? That's the same fabric they will interact with as adults. It is our diversity that makes America the great nation that it is.

In any nation, the promise of equal opportunity is measured by the extent to which minorities can pursue public service careers. In 2004, after three years of struggle, a Sikh man won the right to serve as a police officer in New York City—while wearing his turban. In 2009, after filing a federal lawsuit, a Sikh man won the right to serve as a federal security officer—while wearing his turban. In 2009, after many months of struggle, two Sikhs won the right to serve in the U.S. Army, while wearing their turbans.

By and by, Sikh Americans are overcoming barriers to equal opportunity. We urge this Legislature to take advantage of this opportunity to join the march of progress.