

Governor signs repeal on teachers' religious dress; ban will lift in July 2011

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Michelle Cole/The Oregonian

Surrounded by lawmakers and rank-and-file Oregonians who support the change, Gov. Ted Kulongoski signs into law a bill that repeals Oregon's ban on teacher religious dress.

With supporters of religious freedom looking on, Gov. Ted Kulongoski signed a bill this morning that will end Oregon's ban on teachers wearing head scarves and other religious attire.

The ban won't lift until after the 2010-11 school year. The rationale for the delay is to give leaders of the state's [labor](#) and [education](#) agencies plenty of time to write detailed regulations for carrying out the new law.

The governor, who declined to comment on the issue while it was before lawmakers in February, called changing the law "The right thing to do." Some lawmakers in both parties opposed the bill on the grounds that schoolchildren might feel oppressed or proselytized by their teacher's religious headcovering or other similar attire.

Kulongoski forcefully disagreed. "Repeal is consistent with Oregon tradition that honors individual beliefs, values diversity, and promotes tolerance," he wrote in [an official letter](#) that accompanied his signature on the bill.

But he emphasized the importance of very clear statewide rules, to be written under the

leadership of the Oregon Department of Education and the Bureau of Labor and Industry, to tell schools how to balance religious liberty for teachers with students' rights to a religious neutral schoolhouse.

"Many school districts, educational service districts and charter schools may interpret and apply this new law differently," he wrote. "Unless there are some clear rules at the outset, there is a potential for inconsistent or even potentially discriminatory application...There needs to be very clear standards and guidelines so that Oregon's schools can implement this law fairly and as uniformly as possible."

As the governor signed the bill, McMinnville math teacher Taghrid Elmeligui stood just to his right, wearing a blue-and-white head scarf and a smile. Elmeligui came to the United States 20 years ago from Egypt and became a U.S. citizen three years ago.

After he signed the bill, Kulongoski asked if anyone wanted to comment. Elmeligui spoke up shyly at first, noting that she was missing teaching her class Thursday morning to be in Salem for the event.

"I became a U.S. citizen only three years ago," she said. "I would not have thought I would have been part of changing the law of the land." Fighting back tears she added: "I don't have words to express my gratitude."

- Michelle Cole and [Betsy Hammond](#)