

Cornell, Columbia and UPenn among 7 schools facing Education Dept. probe over allegations of antisemitism and Islamophobia

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Education Secretary Miguel Cardona speaks with students during a visit to Towson University to discuss antisemitism on college campuses on November 2, 2023.

CNN

By Julia Nikhinson/AP

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The Department of Education has launched investigations into seven schools, including Cornell University, Columbia University and University of Pennsylvania, after receiving complaints about alleged incidents of antisemitism and Islamophobia.

The investigations include five antisemitism cases and two Islamophobia cases.

They are the first investigations of this kind by the Department of Education since the October 7 Hamas terror attack on Israel.

The schools were informed about the investigations within the last 24 hours. They include one K-12 school, the Maize Unified School District in Kansas, and six colleges: Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, Cornell University in New York, Columbia University in New York, Wellesley College in Massachusetts, The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York, and the University of Pennsylvania.

Education Secretary Miguel Cardona told CNN on Friday that he anticipates more investigations are coming.

A list of K-12 schools and colleges under investigation for possible discrimination based on shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics is now posted on the [Department of Education's website](#) and will be updated weekly.

At the conclusion of the investigations, the Department of Education will make recommendations to the schools. The schools risk losing federal funding if they don't comply.

"If an institution refuses to follow the law to protect students, we would withhold dollars," Cardona said.

The investigations were launched under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which says universities and K-12 schools have a responsibility to provide all students with an environment free from discrimination. Anyone can file a Title VI complaint with the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights.

College campuses have seen a rise in tension over the ongoing Israel-Hamas war. [A Cornell University student](#) has been federally charged in connection with a series of online posts threatening to kill and harm Jewish students, and the University of Pennsylvania [recently alerted the FBI](#) to a series of threatening antisemitic emails sent to the Ivy League school's staff.

"The level of intensity is really high," Cardona said.

“We need to match it with a level of response that meets the moment. We need to be listening to our students; we need to let them know that they will be safe in our schools – that we’re not going to tolerate hate or threats on campus,” he added.

Earlier this month, [the Department of Education issued guidance](#) to colleges and K-12 schools, reminding them that they have a legal obligation to address incidents of discrimination – including against those who are Jewish, Israeli, Muslim, Arab or Palestinian.

The department also recently updated its discrimination complaint [form](#), specifying that Title VI’s protection from discrimination based on race, color or national origin extends to students who are or are perceived to be Jewish, Muslim, Hindu or Sikh, or based on other shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics.

Department officials [have been holding listening sessions](#) this week with K-12 school leaders to hear how they are keeping students safe in the wake of the Israel-Hamas conflict. A webinar series is expected to launch in December to help school personnel and community-based organizations develop strategies to prevent and respond to hate-based threats, bullying and harassment.

“Hate has no place in our schools, period. When students are targeted because they are—or are perceived to be—Jewish, Muslim, Arab, Sikh, or any other ethnicity or shared ancestry, schools must act to ensure safe and inclusive educational environments where everyone is free to learn,” Cardona said in a statement Thursday.