

Dispute over boy's head covering erupts into accusations of racism at Edmonton school

An Edmonton mother is accusing a north Edmonton Catholic school of racial profiling after her 11-year-old son was asked to remove his durag, but the school maintains that the headscarf simply violated its no hats policy.

Una Momolu said her son Emmell, a Grade 6 student at Christ the King Elementary/Junior High School, was asked to remove the red durag on Sept. 12, and she alleged that he was accused of being involved in a gang.

Less than two weeks later, Momolu met with the school's principal, Phebe Switzer. Police were eventually called to the meeting after the mother's behaviour became "extremely irate."

"The parent could be heard yelling outside of the school when officers arrived," Edmonton Police Service spokesman Scott Pattison said in a statement. "Upon entering the school, an officer also observed several school staff members in tears."

Momolu was subsequently banned from school property for the rest of the academic year.

Momolu recorded the meeting with school officials. In an excerpt, she was heard saying, "You don't ask an 11-year-old boy if he is affiliated with a gang because of a head garment." Momolu and Emmell's father could not be reached for comment.

In the recording, Switzer said the school's police resource officer had identified gangs whose members wear durags.

"Right now in the northeast end of Edmonton there is a gang, and they are all wearing red durags and it is very violent, and there are bad things happening. And when (the school resource officer) sees someone wearing a red durag, he wants to inform the parent what the red durag means and he wants the student to know he can't wear those in school."

In a statement, the Edmonton Catholic School Division said the student was asked to remove the durag because of the school's "no caps, bandanas or hats" policy.

"The issue of race had no bearing on the actions taken and was never part of the discussion," the statement read. "After a thorough review of the incident,

the Edmonton Catholic School Division is confident in the actions and decisions made by the principal and will not be making any additional comments.”

Nevertheless, Momolu and her supporters organized a rally demanding school officials apologize, rescind her ban from Christ the King School, and undergo training on the cultural importance of durags and the dangers of racial profiling. The rally was set for 6 p.m. on Oct. 16 at R.J.W. (Dick) Mather Memorial Park, at 98th Avenue and 105th Street.

Education Minister Adriana LaGrange was asked about the incident during question period at the Alberta Legislative Assembly. She is now calling for a complete report on the incident from Edmonton Catholic School Division.

“People feeling discriminated against based on their race is absolutely unacceptable,” LaGrange said.

Grandin Media will update this story as more information becomes available.