



June 21, 2021

VIA EMAIL

Scott Brabrand, Ed.D., Superintendent
Fairfax County School Board
Fairfax County Public Schools
Gatehouse Administration Center
8115 Gatehouse Road
Falls Church, VA 22042

Dear Superintendent Brabrand and Members of the Fairfax County School Board:

We write on behalf of the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA), the oldest and one of the largest pro-Israel organizations in the U.S., dedicated to fighting antisemitism and anti-Israel bias in schools and on college campuses. The ZOA led the successful six-year battle to ensure that Title VI of the Civil Rights Act would be enforced to protect Jewish students from antisemitic harassment and intimidation. We have helped Jewish students enforce this right at schools across the U.S.

Members of your community alerted us to your failure to address the hate-inciting and divisive conduct of Abrar Omeish, a member of the Fairfax County School Board (FCSB). Ms. Omeish used her platform as a school board member to viciously attack Israel with falsehoods, alienating and hurting members of the community she is obligated to support. We were troubled to learn that your inaction in response to Ms. Omeish's misconduct is part of a pattern of official indifference to problems that Jewish students have been facing in Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) for many years. Details follow.

Abrar Omeish's Breach of her Obligations as a School Board Member

The Code of Conduct that governs the actions of all FCSB members could not be clearer. School board members are required to act with "integrity in all matters" and "support the full development of all children and the welfare of the community." They are also required to "refrain from using" their "board position for personal or partisan gain," and to "avoid any conflict of interest or the appearance of impropriety."

Abrar Omeish is violating all of these Code of Conduct requirements. Ms. Omeish maintains a Facebook page that identifies her as a public figure and a member of the FCSB. Her Facebook page is emblazoned with the logo of the FCSB and she posts frequently about FCPS activities. The same is true of Ms. Omeish's Twitter page. Until recently, her Facebook and Twitter pages linked directly to her official bio on the FCPS website. Yet on May 13, 2021, Ms.

Omeish used both social media platforms to promote personal, partisan anti-Israel views, which included misleading statements and outright falsehoods about the Jewish state:

- Ms. Omeish accused Israelis of killing Palestinians, omitting the essential fact that Israelis acted defensively – as any country would – after the Palestinian Arab U.S.-designated terrorist group Hamas launched thousands of rockets into Israel, deliberately targeting innocent Israeli men, women and children in their homes and communities. Ms. Omeish also omitted the essential fact that Hamas deliberately targets Israeli civilians, while Israel takes every possible precaution to avoid harming Gazan civilians, whom Hamas uses as human shields and deliberately places in harm's way.
- Ms. Omeish falsely accused Israel of “desecrating the Holy Land,” when in fact Israel protects holy places from desecration and guarantees free access to all, regardless of religion. This is enshrined in [Israeli law](#). It was actually Jordan that desecrated Jewish holy places when it illegally occupied the eastern part of Jerusalem from 1948 to 1967. Jewish graves in the Mt. of Olives cemetery were destroyed and gravestones were used by the Jordanians as pavement and latrines. Fifty-eight synagogues, some of them centuries-old, were destroyed or ruined; others were transformed into stables and chicken coops. Christians also suffered under the Jordanian occupation of Jerusalem. Jordan restricted their visits to Christian holy places and passed laws to control Christian schools, even requiring that the schools teach the Koran.
- Ms. Omeish falsely accused Israel of “apartheid” when in fact approximately two million Palestinian Arabs are citizens of Israel, with full and equal rights. They serve in the Knesset (Israel's Parliament) and on the judiciary, including the Supreme Court. They work alongside Jews and others in Israeli hospitals, universities, and businesses. Recently, the Arab party Ra'am became part of Israel's new coalition government.
- Ms. Omeish falsely accused Israel of “colonization” when in fact Jews are indigenous to the land of Israel, with ties to their religious and ancestral homeland that go back almost 4000 years.

In violation of her obligations under the Code of Conduct to act with integrity and support the welfare of the community, Ms. Omeish not only spread biased information and outright lies about Israel; she also divided and hurt members of her community and incited others to hate Jews and Israel. Here are some of the hateful, offensive and antisemitic posts on social media, provoked by Ms. Omeish:

- “Kudos to Abrar for using her platform to bring awareness to this cause despite the millions and dollars that go into Israeli lobbying to silence pro Palestinian voices.”
- “Israel doesn't exist . . . the land those Zionists are living on and in is Palestinian hun.”
- “I wonder which country is this? A country without a homeland! A people without history or identity?! National anthem without a country? A people that the Prophet Moses left and found them worshipping a calf?! Your Hebrew is fragments of international languages? Hey! Do you mean that phantom state known as the Jews?!”

- “Palestine is ours and it will remain for us, and there is no place for you among us,” with pictures of the Palestinian Arab flag and the entire State of Israel as a Palestinian Arab state.
- “[An] inclusive school system doesn’t mean supporting an apartheid state . . .”
- “. . . Israel was built by Terrorists and is a terrorist state to this day.”
- “The Palestinian Islamic issue continues in spite of the Jews!” with a photo of the Israeli flag bearing the Star of David in flames.
- “. . . [Y]ou are the occupying party that defiles the pure and holy land. You have no right to speak because the land is not yours . . .”
- “Israel does not have the right to live in the State of Palestine, because in our view it is just a group of oppressive colonialists who killed children, women and the elderly. This group began its occupation in 1948. Can search for this! Emphasizing that this land is ours and will always be ours, and that the occupation will come out sooner rather than later.”

Though knowing that she incited all this Jew- and Israel-hatred, Ms. Omeish has nevertheless dug in her heels and refused to remove her Facebook and Twitter posts, and to apologize for the hurt and harm she has caused. Indeed, she is outrageously claiming that *she* has been victimized – that she is being accused of bias because she is “not white and blonde enough.”

Ms. Omeish is promoting antisemitism, plain and simple, based on the widely-accepted [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance \(IHRA\) working definition of antisemitism](#), used by the U.S. government and many countries and institutions here and around the world. Demonizing Israel, applying double standards to Israel, and denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination (for example, by claiming that Israel’s existence is a racist endeavor) are all manifestations of antisemitism.

FCSB’s Failure to Respond Appropriately and Effectively to Ms. Omeish’s Misconduct

Almost as troubling as Ms. Omeish’s conduct is your apparent indifference to it. The Superintendent is required to “maintain an open, responsive, and welcoming environment,” and to “effectively handle complaints.” School board members are required to “support the full development of all children and the welfare of the community.”

Almost immediately after Ms. Omeish posted her hateful and incendiary anti-Israel statements, many members of the community began contacting the Superintendent and the FCSB, condemning the posts and urging that Ms. Omeish be required to remove them. Individual school board members reportedly responded to some of the complaints, justifying Ms. Omeish’s misconduct as protected free speech. No one acknowledged that Ms. Omeish was impermissibly using her platform as a school board member to promote her partisan political views that were based on demonizing lies and material omissions about Israel, deliberately inflaming the community. With the exception of one school board member (who condemned the “alienation” that Ms. Omeish was sowing but did not acknowledge that her conduct was antisemitic), the FCSB did not exercise its own First Amendment rights to condemn the hatred

and divisiveness that Ms. Omeish was fanning. No one dared acknowledge that if a school board member had used their official position to promote their politics in a way that demonized and hurt Black, Asian, or other minority members of the community, FCPS rightly would not have tolerated the conduct for one minute.

At a May 20, 2021 school board meeting, Jewish parents spoke up and condemned Ms. Omeish's violation of the Code of Conduct. One parent expressed her anguish about how her teenage daughter now feels scared and unsafe. Yet not one of you rebuked Ms. Omeish for using her platform as a school board member to promote false, hateful and inflammatory statements about Israel.

On May 24, 2021, FCPS issued a "Statement Following the Recent Conflict in the Middle East." The statement acknowledged recent antisemitic attacks in the U.S. and abroad and recognized that "these events impact the Jewish community in a direct way." But the statement ignored the antisemitism in the FCPS community itself, recently fueled by Ms. Omeish. And rather than keep the focus exclusively on antisemitism, FCPS diluted the statement by including a condemnation of Islamophobia, too.

This contrasts starkly with how FCPS has responded to bigotry targeting other groups. A March 22 FCPS statement focused solely on the violence, harassment, and hate directed toward Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Two FCPS statements – on March 29 and April 20 – focused on the Derek Chauvin murder trial and condemned racism. Antisemitism deserved the same singular focus.

As you no doubt must know, antisemitism has surged to [alarming levels](#) in recent years. After Israel's defensive war against the terrorist group Hamas last month, violent expressions of Jew-hatred have exploded. Jews are being attacked in the streets of New York City, Los Angeles, and elsewhere, simply because they are Jews. Given the current climate, your failure to respond appropriately to a school board member who herself is inciting Jew-hatred by disseminating false, misleading and incendiary information about Israel is irresponsible.

Indeed, if anything, FCPS has wrongly elevated Ms. Omeish's status. On June 7, 2021, she was given the honor of addressing the graduating class at Justice High School, a speaking invitation that should have been rescinded after her hateful and divisive conduct.

When Ms. Omeish spoke at the graduation, to a school community that is one of the most diverse in FCPS, she once again used her position at a FCPS event for her personal partisan gain. Addressing the graduates in English, she [said](#), "The world sees the accolade, the diploma, the fruit of all your years yet be reminded of the detail of your struggle." But when she repeated her speech in Arabic, Ms. Omeish stoked the flames again, [encouraging](#) graduating students to remember their "jihad" – a word that means both "struggle" and a holy war against infidels and enemies of Islam. The term is particularly troubling to Jews and Israelis since the charter of the terrorist group Hamas repeatedly encourages "jihad" with the goal of "liberating Palestine," i.e., destroying Israel. (In 2007, Ms. Omeish's father was [reportedly](#) forced to resign from the Virginia Commission on Immigration when a 2006 video showed him condemning Israel and advocating "the jihad way.")

Official tolerance of Ms. Omeish's expression of her personal, partisan and divisive views in her capacity as a school board member has emboldened others to engage in similar conduct. At the Justice High School graduation, the senior class president led all the attendees in the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. Instead of reciting the correct words, "one nation, under God," the student class president said instead, "one nation, under Allah," deliberately alienating the non-Muslims in attendance.

FCPS's Pattern of Failing to Effectively Address Antisemitism

FCPS's inaction is also reprehensible, since well before the problems triggered by Ms. Omeish's misconduct, you were on notice that Jewish students at FCPS were facing hostility and outright antisemitism.

"Heil Hitler" Salutes, Jewish "Jokes," Swastikas, Etc. Routinely Ignored

One parent described numerous incidents of antisemitism directed at her children when they were students at Irving Middle School and West Springfield High School, including the following:

- Students threw coins at these Jewish children;
- Students gave these Jewish children the "Heil Hitler" salute in school hallways and in class;
- Students made jokes in the presence of these Jewish children about money – including "Jew them down" – and about the Holocaust;
- After one Jewish child went to the school bathroom, the child returned to her desk to find a swastika drawn on her paper;

You cannot claim ignorance. This parent reported the "Heil Hitler" salute to a teacher who simply chalked up such incidents to foolishness. The teacher did not recognize the seriousness of the conduct and the harm it causes. The teacher did not take any steps to address the problem, punish the perpetrators, or ensure that the behavior did not recur.

The parent also notified the high school principal that a swastika was etched into her child's desk. The principal claimed to take the matter seriously and assured the parent that the swastika would be removed. It wasn't and it remained there for the rest of the school year. The principal never notified the community about the swastika or used it as a means of discussing and condemning antisemitism, and emphasizing to students and their parents that antisemitism would not be tolerated.

The parent also contacted the principal about swastikas that defaced the high school bathrooms. He did not respond appropriately to these antisemitic incidents either. The swastikas were removed, but the principal failed to notify the community about the antisemitic vandalism, to condemn it, and to make it clear that antisemitism would not be tolerated in his school and that perpetrators would be held accountable.

These are not isolated incidents. Another parent reported that in her daughter's seventh grade class at James W. Robinson Secondary School, classmates referred to one Jewish child as

“Jew boy” and used other antisemitic slurs. Reportedly, the teacher did not put a stop to the behavior. Yet another parent recently wrote to Robinson’s principal, asking about the steps that the school would be taking “to address all the antisemitic micro aggressions that have been going on for years.” As an example, the parent shared a joke that children heard at school:

Question: What’s the difference between putting a pizza in the oven and putting a Jew in the oven?

Answer: The pizza doesn’t scream.

The parent also reported a threat made to her son by a classmate: If he was not invited to the son’s bar mitzvah, the classmate would “show up and salute Hitler.” The parent implored, “FCPS and Robinson have a responsibility to keep all students safe. What’s the plan?”

The principal did not lay out a plan. She did not even respond.

Yet another parent recently wrote to Robinson’s principal, urging that teachers receive training on how to recognize and address antisemitism in the classroom. She described a situation at FCPS that should be as intolerable to you as it is to us:

Every Jewish child experiences some form of anti-Semitism at Robinson and all FCPS schools. From the oven "jokes" to Hitler salutes; when the Holocaust is being taught, Anne Frank is being read (grade 8), or when *Night* is being read (grade 11) Jewish children are the targets of prejudice and anti-Semitic rhetoric from the other students. Teachers are not properly prepared or trained to handle this type of bigotry towards Jewish students, and it happens year after year.

This parent offered to assist the principal in setting up appropriate training. To date, the principal has not responded to the offer or even acknowledged that antisemitism is a problem at her school or any other in FCPS.

Jewish Religious Holidays Disregarded, and Religious Accommodations Denied

FCPS [claims](#) to recognize “its Constitutional responsibilities to . . . make reasonable accommodations for students to meet their personal religious obligations.” Yet parents report that FCPS has failed to reasonably accommodate Jewish students (and teachers) who observe Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Yearbook Picture Day is unnecessarily scheduled on these Jewish Holy Days, as are PTA meetings, back-to-school nights, sports events, tests and test reviews.

Jewish students have been penalized for their religious observance of the Jewish Holy Days. When one student could not attend the first meeting of the Yearbook staff at her middle school due to her religious observance, the Jewish student was reportedly denied a staff position.

Another student was an accomplished athlete who tried out and was invited to join the competitive junior varsity team in her sport at Robinson. But reportedly, she was ultimately denied a position on the competitive team simply because she could not attend one of the six-days-a-week practices that took place on Saturday mornings, a time that she attended synagogue. Saturday morning religious services, which she frequently led, were a significant part of this student's life. Yet FCPS refused to provide reasonable accommodations for her religious practices.

When one parent expressed her concern to a teacher about important school events being scheduled on the Jewish Holy Days, the teacher derisively [responded](#) with words such as, "Well, I can't just reschedule everything just because your family has a holiday."

As you surely know, the problems at FCPS are so serious that one Jewish parent recently wrote publicly about how FCPS is failing Jewish students. In an [article](#) published in the *Washington Post* this past March, this Jewish parent cogently described the difficulties: "We have been ignored. We have experienced microaggressions, gaslighting and outright anti-Semitism."

When this Jewish parent and her husband implored the administration to intervene and address the problems their children were enduring, they reportedly "were met with resistance and denial." No one, up the ranks, even uttered the word "antisemitism," let alone condemned or responded effectively to the bigotry.

A Years-Long Antisemitic Nazi Display Ignored and Defended

FCPS's insensitivity, and indeed tone-deafness, to Jewish students' needs and concerns are illustrated by how abysmally school officials handled a longstanding Holocaust commemoration project at John R. Lewis High School, formerly named Robert E. Lee High School, after the famous Confederate general. In 2003, an English teacher at the school received a grant from the National Holocaust Memorial Museum and instituted a well-intended project for students to learn about the Holocaust. After reading Elie Wiesel's *Night* (an autobiographical account of Wiesel's survival of the Nazi death camps), students decorated tiles to represent how the book affected them. The tiles were displayed on a wall in the school hallway.

For approximately five years, the project expressed the inspirational imagery that had been the original intent of the grant. However, in the years that followed, the project morphed into something offensive and horrific. Many students decorated their tiles with swastikas and Nazi flags, and sometimes these anti-Jewish symbols were depicted together with the Jewish Star of David. Reportedly, approximately 40 percent of the tiles included all of this disgusting imagery, and all of these tiles were displayed on a wall in the school hallway.

Despite knowing that the tiles were offensive, particularly to Jewish students, teachers and staff, the school and the English Department refused to remove them, reportedly defending the tiles as the students' artwork that should not be tampered with, no matter how hateful and hurtful their messages. Teachers and students made numerous efforts to have these tiles

removed and replaced with tiles that exemplified the purpose of the grant, but they all failed. Jewish students and teachers were forced to pretend that the tiles simply were not there.

It was not until 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, that the new principal of the school appreciated how offensive this wall of tiles was and ensured that it was taken down. It speaks volumes about FCPS that it took so many years to finally remove it. It was far easier to change the name of the high school, so that it no longer glorified a leader of the Confederate south, than to remove a reprehensible public display that school officials knew and should have known was antisemitic and hurt members of the FCPS community.

Trivializing the Holocaust

W.T. Woodson High School's approach to teaching about the Holocaust is more evidence of FCPS's tone-deafness to Jewish concerns. In March 2019, a teacher devised an [in-class Holocaust study activity](#) for her tenth graders. She asked groups of students to list Holocaust-related terms for each letter of the alphabet, and then directed them to call out the words, understandably upsetting Jewish students.

This year, the teacher had her tenth grade students create an ABC book about the Holocaust, which trivialized the worst genocide in human history. However well-intentioned the teacher may have been (she [reportedly](#) apologized for the insensitivity and for causing pain to Jewish students), these assignments reflect FCPS's fundamental ignorance about the serious and longstanding problem of Jew-hatred, a deeply flawed Holocaust education curriculum, and an insensitivity to Jewish students' concerns. These are problems that FCPS must rectify.

Recommended Steps

As you surely know, you not only have a moral obligation to address the antisemitic hostility in your schools. You also have the legal obligation to do so. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, you are [required](#) to take prompt and effective steps reasonably calculated to end the harassment, eliminate any hostile environment and its effects, and prevent the harassment from recurring.

Consistent with your obligations under Title VI, we urge you to take the following steps:

- Issue a clear and unequivocal statement to the community that condemns Ms. Omeish's social media posts as hateful, divisive and antisemitic, that acknowledges and condemns the antisemitism that is growing in the U.S. and exists in your own schools, and that assures your community that antisemitism will no longer be tolerated, whether it be from students, teachers, staff, school board members, or anyone else.
- In your statement, make it clear that FCPS will adopt the IHRA working definition of antisemitism, including its examples of contemporary forms of antisemitism, and will use the IHRA definition as a guide for understanding and responding to antisemitism at FCPS.

- In your statement, educate the FCPS community – including students, parents, teachers, staff, and administrators – about the fact that for many Jewish students, Zionism is an integral part of their identity and their ethnic and ancestral heritage. Educate the community that Jewish students have the right to openly express their identification with Israel. Make it clear that FCPS will safeguard this right and safeguard the ability of students to participate in FCPS activities free from harassment and discrimination.
- Instruct Ms. Omeish that consistent with the Code of Conduct, she must immediately remove her partisan, hateful, and divisive social media posts.
- Censure Ms. Omeish if she fails to remove the social media posts.
- Issue a directive to all school officials and teachers that they must reasonably accommodate students' and teachers' religious observance and that they cannot schedule PTA meetings, back-to-school night programs, tests and test reviews, and other school-wide or district-wide events on the Jewish Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur. If FCPS truly valued the religious observance of its Jewish students and families, then school would be closed on those days, as Jewish families have reportedly requested.
- Mandate training for all staff, teachers and administrators on antisemitism and how it manifests today – including relating to Israel – using the IHRA working definition of antisemitism as a frame of reference.
- Mandate training for all students on antisemitism and how it manifests today – including relating to Israel – using the IHRA definition as a frame of reference.
- Fulfill your state's [requirement](#) to educate your students about the Holocaust. Teachers are reportedly paying lip service to this requirement, devoting insufficient time to this critical subject and permitting students to leave the room if the subject is too much for them. Some Holocaust assignments have trivialized the Holocaust and been hurtful and offensive to Jews. The Holocaust is a heinous and disturbing part of history, but it is essential that all students learn about it and learn from it.
- Meet with Jewish parents and guardians to listen to their concerns and commit to finally addressing them.

Kindly let us hear from you no later than Friday, July 2, 2021, about whether you will be taking the steps we have recommended, all of which are eminently doable and reasonably calculated to address the antisemitic hostile environment at FCPS. If we do not receive a satisfactory response from you by that date, we will consider next steps, including but not limited to a complaint to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights.

Thank you and looking forward to your response. Please know that we are here to help in any way to ensure that Jewish students are afforded the safe, respectful and welcoming learning environment that all FCPS students deserve.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Morton A. Klein". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'M'.

Morton A. Klein
National President

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Susan B. Tuchman, Esq.". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'S' and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Susan B. Tuchman, Esq.
Director, Center for Law and Justice