



January 25, 2022

VIA EMAIL (OCR.DC@ed.gov)

Office for Civil Rights
District of Columbia Office
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20202-1475

Dear Regional Director:

The Zionist Organization of America (ZOA)¹ files this complaint under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act against Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) in Virginia, alleging that FCPS has failed to respond appropriately and effectively to a hostile antisemitic environment in violation of Title VI. As this complaint shows, there is a longstanding practice and pattern of harassment and discrimination against Jewish students (and staff) in FCPS, which FCPS officials have refused to address.

Prior to filing this complaint, the ZOA tried to resolve the antisemitism problems directly with FCPS, without success. On June 21, 2021, the ZOA sent a detailed letter to FCPS's superintendent and school board members, describing the problems reported to us by Jewish parents in FCPS. In the letter, we recommended reasonable steps for FCPS to take to eliminate the hostile environment for Jewish students and ensure that it would not recur, as required by Title VI. To date, FCPS has not responded to indicate any steps it is willing to take to ensure that Jewish students are afforded the safe and welcoming learning environment that they are entitled to under the law, and that every student deserves. The problems are detailed below.

“Heil Hitler” Salutes, Jewish “Jokes,” Swastikas, Etc. are Routinely Ignored

Jewish children in FCPS have endured numerous incidents of antisemitism in FCPS. One parent described what her children dealt with when they were students at Irving Middle School and West Springfield High School, including the following:

- Students threw coins at these Jewish children, made jokes about money, and used the vile phrase “Jew them down” – all reflecting antisemitic stereotypes about Jews being greedy and materialistic;

¹ Founded in 1897, the ZOA is the oldest pro-Israel organization in the U.S. Today, the ZOA is the leading major American Jewish organization fighting for the safety and security of Israel and for the rights and interests of the Jewish people. 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.

- 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 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.

This parent reported the “Heil Hitler” salute to a teacher who simply chalked it up to foolishness. The teacher did not recognize the seriousness of the conduct or the harm it causes. The teacher did not take any steps to address the problem, or punish the perpetrators, or ensure that the behavior did not recur.

This 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 remained there for the rest of the school year. The principal never notified the community about the swastika or used the antisemitic vandalism as a means of discussing and condemning Jew-hatred, and making it clear to students and their families 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 send a message to the community condemning the antisemitic vandalism as intolerable, and emphasizing that perpetrators of such conduct would be held accountable.

These are not isolated incidents. Another parent reported that when her son was a student at Luther Jackson Middle School, he came home and reported that a swastika had been drawn on a music stand in his school band class. This student reported the swastika to the teacher, as did other students. But the swastika remained on the music stand for most of the rest of the school year, until a student erased it.

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 – and 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 made reference to a threat that had been made to her son before his bar mitzvah, by a classmate: The classmate threatened to “show up and salute Hitler,” if he did not

receive an invitation to the bar mitzvah. The parent implored, “FCPS and Robinson have a responsibility to keep all students safe. What’s the plan?”

The principal did meet with this parent and another, at the parents’ initiative; the parents expressed their concern about the antisemitism in FCPS and asked about the plan for keeping Jewish students safe. The principal assured them that these matters would be discussed at a staff meeting, but the parents were never informed that the matters were actually discussed, nor were they provided with the plan for keeping their children, and other Jewish children, safe in FCPS.

Another parent reported that when her son (JH) was a student at Franklin Middle School, he was the target of antisemitic “jokes.” Other students – his “friends” – threw money at JH and said things like “Hey, that’s yours.” It was clear to JH that he was being targeted because he is Jewish and the “jokes” hurt him.

When JH was a sophomore at Chantilly High School, he was seated with other students in his Spanish class, at four tables that were pushed together. One student wrote the words “solid and “liquid” on a piece of paper and drew a Star of David on the paper. He showed the paper to JH and asked, “Do you get the joke?” The “joke” was that the drawing represented the three states of matter: solid, liquid and gas – and the last, gas, was represented by the Jewish Star of David.

When JH’s parent alerted Chantilly’s principal to the incident, he spoke with the Spanish teacher about it. But the school took no official action. It failed to notify the school community about the antisemitism and failed to use this incident as a means of educating the community about antisemitism and declaring that there would be zero tolerance for it.

When JH reported swastikas in the school bathroom at Chantilly High School, FCPS officials responding similarly, failing to issue a statement to the community that alerted them to the swastikas, condemned them as expressions of antisemitism, and made it clear that antisemitism in any form would not be tolerated in FCPS. The principal actually referred to one of the swastikas as “tiny” – as if the size of the swastika was at all relevant to how threatening a symbol it is to Jews or to the school’s obligation to effectively address it. The swastikas were simply painted over – as if that were enough.

Yet another parent discovered that her son (JK), a student at Falls Church High School, had received hundreds of antisemitic texts on his cellphone from two other students (FB and AB) at Lake Braddock Secondary School, also in FCPS. The texts referred to JK as a “f**king Jew ass whore,” “f**king Jew,” “dirty Jew,” “Jew F**ktard,” “dollar dealer,” and other anti-Jewish slurs. One text was a photo of AB giving the Sieg Heil salute. JK’s parent reportedly has more than 100 pages of screenshots of these vile antisemitic texts, which were sent to JK during school hours. Receiving such texts would be alarming and frightening to anyone. JK was particularly vulnerable, struggling at the time with severe depression.

When FB threatened in a text to come to JK's home with a gun, JK's family contacted the police. The police were ready to arrest FB immediately, but the family did not want to proceed criminally, wrongly believing that FCPS would handle the matter appropriately and effectively without involving law enforcement.

JK's mother went to JK's guidance counselor and assistant principal at Falls Church for support. They contacted the principal and a School Resource Officer (SRO) at Lake Braddock, who offered a mediation program that would bring all the parties, including the parents, together to address the problems.

FB's parents refused the meeting and verbally threatened JK and his parents with physical harm, which JK's parents also reported to both schools. Both JK and his parents feared for their physical safety.

Lake Braddock's SRO dismissed the entire matter. He asked JK's mother what she thought would happen and told her that the two students who had threatened and abused her son would not face any consequences. JK's mother called Lake Braddock's assistant principal a number of times. When finally reached, the assistant principal was rude and dismissive, essentially responding to JK's mother's justifiable concerns with "What do you want us to do about it?" The assistant principal refused even to discuss the matter with JK's mother, citing student confidentiality, even though JK's physical and emotional safety and well-being were at stake.

No mediation took place. As far as JK's mother knows, the antisemitic bullies suffered no consequences. And JK received no institutional support from FCPS. FCPS officials "just hoped that we would go away," JK's mother reported to us. She and her family felt "unsupported and unheard." FCPS's inaction in response to the abuse and threats of physical violence that a student and his family endured simply because they are Jews is a stark contrast with the response of the local soccer club to which both JK and FB belonged. Upon learning of FB's abusive and threatening antisemitic conduct, the local soccer club expelled him immediately.

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 simply should not be tolerated:

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 in her school or any other in FCPS.

In November 2021, a Jewish student at James Madison High School discovered two swastikas in a boys' bathroom in the school. After he reported the antisemitic vandalism to two of his teachers and to the school's security office, the school principal dragged his feet and refused to take reasonable and eminently doable steps to immediately and effectively address the antisemitism. Despite numerous requests from the student's parent to publicly acknowledge the incident and condemn it as antisemitic, the principal refused. He repeatedly claimed that a message from the school principal was unwarranted because the swastikas were "small" in size (the same justification for inaction that the principal of Chantilly High School gave when swastikas, including a "tiny" one, defaced that school) and not in such a visible place in the school – as if the size and location of the antisemitic symbols mattered for the purpose of acknowledging that an act of antisemitic vandalism had occurred. In addition, the principal said, a statement was not appropriate because the perpetrator(s), and the dates and times that the vandalism was committed, had not been identified– even though a statement from the principal urging anyone with information to come forward would increase the likelihood that more details about the vandalism would emerge and the perpetrator(s) would be found.

The only steps that the principal was willing to take were to engage select student groups in discussion about how their actions impact others; direct staff to create an advisory lesson that would cover incidents of discrimination; and raise at a future school principals' meeting the issue of improving school curriculums to increase mutual understanding among students. Not one of these steps was a direct or effective response to the antisemitic vandalism in the school.

In one of the parent's last exchanges with the principal, the principal commented that "kids do things all the time that parents don't agree with." The statement wrongly suggested that students skipping classes or failing to complete their homework could possibly be equated with students deliberately vandalizing school property in a way that harms Jewish students and makes them feel unwelcome and unsafe.

The principal's failure and refusal to take obvious and necessary steps in response to the antisemitic vandalism exacerbated the harm that the Jewish student and his family suffered from the vandalism itself. As the parent poignantly wrote to the principal:

As upset as our family (including our son) was by the discovery of the hateful graffiti, the power of such vandalism (by an ignorant or hateful person) to upset us pales in comparison to the level of upset caused by what we consider to be a feeble and delayed response by the adults who are supposed to set examples to the students they are entrusted with leading.

In December 2021, students at Fairfax High School harassed Jewish students (and others) with [antisemitic and other bigoted statements](#) and [offensive drawings](#). FCPS responded by issuing a vague and essentially meaningless statement to the FCPS community. The statement condemned generally “all acts of intolerance and violence in our community, most importantly in our schools.” It did not inform the community about the troubling incident that triggered the statement. It did not condemn the bigotry that students displayed at Fairfax or the students who engaged in the conduct. The statement never even used the word “antisemitism.”

All of these examples demonstrate FCPS’s repeated failure, over many years, to respond effectively to antisemitic harassment and discrimination, in violation of Title VI.

Jewish Holidays are Disregarded, and Religious Accommodations are Denied

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

For example, when a Jewish 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 Jewish student was an accomplished athlete who tried out and was invited to join the competitive junior varsity team in her sport at Robinson Secondary School. But she was denied a position on the competitive team 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 and indeed penalized her for her religious observance.²

Jewish families in FCPS were hopeful that for the 2021-2022 academic year, FCPS officials would finally be willing to address this longstanding problem. But in March 2021, FCPS considered and ultimately rejected an inclusive and equitable 2021-2022 school calendar

² Jewish employees of FCPS have long faced the same problem. For example, Daniels Run Elementary School made Yom Kippur a professional development day for teachers. The day included workshops and meetings, and teachers shared ideas. Religiously observant Jewish teachers could not attend and were disadvantaged as a result. One Jewish teacher informed us that she was not provided with any materials from the day nor was she asked for her input on the topics that were covered.

The assistant principal at Daniels Run scheduled a parent meeting for a late Friday afternoon, after school hours, without first consulting the teacher whom he expected to attend. When the teacher explained that she could not attend because she would be attending Shabbat services that evening, the assistant principal wrongly questioned the teacher’s religious observance instead of simply accepting it.

that would have provided for school closings on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Eid, and Diwali.

Instead, FCPS adopted an “O” school calendar, which designates 14 days when no exams or significant instruction or events may take place. Rather than “alleviate administrative, academic and emotional burdens on Jewish students, families and teachers,” FCPS’s school board “created a system that clearly caused even greater stress for Jews, burdening them with the responsibility to enforce compliance and defend their own rights, regardless of the personal cost.”

This was the [assessment](#) of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington (JCRC) after it conducted an informal survey of Jewish parents, students and teachers who sought accommodations in order to observe the Jewish high holidays in the fall of 2021. Nearly all 100 respondents to the survey reported numerous failures by FCPS to comply with the new policies regarding implementation of the “O” calendar. According to the JCRC, these failures included:

- Back-to-school nights, tests, quizzes and final reviews improperly scheduled on “O” days;
- New material improperly introduced on designated days;
- Jewish students being singled out by teachers;
- Jewish faculty encountering difficulty in securing substitutes; and
- Staff meetings improperly scheduled on “O” days.

At Robinson Secondary School and other schools in FCPS, teachers put students on the spot and directed them to raise their hands in class if they observed Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, so that the teachers would know whether they could teach new material on those days. This created a hostile environment for Jewish students, causing them to feel singled out and judged. FCPS wrongly put the onus on its Jewish students (and staff) to alert teachers and others that they could not, for example, schedule a quiz on an “O” day. Students justifiably feared that they would suffer adverse consequences – such as a lower grade – if they demanded respect for their religious observance.

If FCPS truly valued the religious observance of its Jewish students and families, then its schools would be closed on the Jewish holy days, as Jewish families have repeatedly requested. Indeed, school districts in the surrounding area, including those with reportedly far fewer Jewish students, are now closed on the first day of Rosh Hashanah and on Yom Kippur, including Arlington Public Schools, Prince William Public Schools, Montgomery County Public Schools, and Loudoun County Public Schools. FCPS is an “[outlier](#).”³

³ On January 13, 2022, FCPS posted a [draft calendar](#) for academic year 2022-2023, which reflects that the first day of Rosh Hashanah (which occurs on September 26 this year) would be a holiday for students but not for teachers and staff. Yom Kippur (which occurs on October 5 this year) would be a holiday for all. While a positive step, it is not positive enough for Jewish staff and teachers. In addition, this is a proposed calendar; last year, a proposed calendar provided days off for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, but FCPS did not ultimately adopt it and the schools were open.

In addition to failing to accommodate Jewish students' religious observance, FCPS has a long pattern of tone-deafness when it comes to considering Jewish concerns during the holiday season. For example, for many years at Terra Centre Elementary School, right around Thanksgiving, a decorated Christmas tree appeared in the front lobby of the school. When a Jewish parent contacted the principal to express her concern, the principal dismissed it, labeling what was plainly a Christmas tree as a "giving tree" with a focus on charity. The following year, the entire fourth grade was directed to wear their Christmas sweaters to school on a designated day. This alienated Jewish students who typically do not own or wear Christmas sweaters.

The principal had an answer for this, too. When a Jewish parent contacted her, the principal described the sweaters that students should be wearing as "holiday sweaters," even though Jews do not typically wear holiday sweaters either. Just days after communicating with the principal, this Jewish parent happened to be at the school at dismissal time. She herself heard the vice principal make an announcement over the school's loudspeaker, reminding all the children to wear their Christmas sweaters to school the following day and to meet in the school lobby for Christmas carols – again sending an insensitive and alienating message to Jewish students. When the parent brought this announcement to the principal's attention, the principal shrugged it off simply as an error on the part of the vice principal who allegedly had meant to refer to holiday sweaters. This parent's child is no longer a student at Terra Centre; when the parent drove by the school this past holiday season, her child was startled to see a "Happy Hanukkah" message posted outside the school for the first time. This was a small step forward, but the fact that the child was startled by this simple message reflects just how insensitive this school had been to the child and to other Jewish students and had failed to make them feel welcome, acknowledged, and included.

During the 2019-2020 school year, the fifth grade chorus at Terra Centre planned to sing a song about Jesus at the holiday concert. A Jewish parent expressed her concern to the music teacher, who justified having the students sing about Jesus by saying that the children would also be singing a Jewish song. The song was one that Jewish parents, and a rabbi they consulted with, had never heard of before, and it had nothing to do with Chanukah. It was actually an Israeli song in the Hebrew language. Several non-Jewish students openly mocked the song during the chorus class and in the hallways, causing the Jewish student to feel uncomfortable, embarrassed and ostracized.

At Robinson, many teachers have decorated their classroom doors with Christmas motifs. A Jewish student and her family experienced similar problems at Deer Park Elementary School. Between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day, the school was decorated like a "Christmas wonderland," according to the student's mother. The then-principal was indifferent to the family's concerns, dismissing the elaborate Christmas ornaments on display as "just balls." All of this shows FCPS's pattern and practice of insensitivity to Jewish concerns, and its failure to create a school community that is inclusive and welcoming to all.

A Years-Long Antisemitic Nazi Display is 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 other 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 Confederate leader, than to remove a reprehensible public display that school officials knew and should have known was antisemitic and hurt members of the FCPS community.

The Holocaust is Trivialized

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.

In the 2020-2021 school 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 inattentiveness to Jewish students' concerns.

A School Board Member's Hate-Inciting, Antisemitic Conduct is Tolerated, in Violation of FCPS's Policies

FCPS has not only tolerated and ignored traditional expressions of antisemitism; it has also reacted with the same indifference and inaction to manifestations of antisemitism related to Israel. FCPS's apathy was especially hurtful and harmful to the Jewish members of the community because the antisemitism was expressed and encouraged by a purported FCPS leader – a school board member named Abrar Omeish, whose actions violated FCPS's own policies.

Ms. Omeish's actions took place during a highly charged period, in May 2021, when Israel was forced to defend its citizens against a barrage of deadly rockets launched from Gaza into Israeli towns and cities by the U.S.-designated terrorist group Hamas.⁴ Israel's need and duty to defend its people fueled shocking antisemitism in Europe and the U.S.⁵

With antisemitism dangerously surging here and around the world, Ms. Omeish deliberately used her official platform to viciously attack Israel with falsehoods. On her Facebook and Twitter pages – both of which trumpeted her position on the school board and prominently bore the school board's logo – Ms. Omeish falsely accused Israel of “desecrating the Holy Land,”⁶ “apartheid,”⁷ and “colonization.”⁸ She also accused Israel of killing Palestinians, omitting the important fact that Israel was acting defensively, as any country would and should if it were being bombarded by deadly rockets from a terrorist group deliberately targeting innocent civilians.

⁴ Over a period of 11 days, [more than 4000 rockets](#) were fired at Israel from Gaza, putting innocent Israeli civilians at risk of injury or death.

⁵ In Los Angeles, for example, a caravan of men drove around throwing bottles and waving Palestinian Arab flags, [chanting](#) “death to Jews” and “free Palestine.” After asking who was Jewish, they [physically attacked](#) a group of Jewish diners outside a restaurant. In [Manhattan](#), a Jewish man wearing a yarmulke and walking down the street was physically attacked by a gang of men who punched, kicked and pepper-sprayed him while yelling antisemitic statements including “F**k Jews” and “F**k Israel.”

⁶ In fact, Israel protects holy places from desecration and guarantees free access to all, regardless of religion, as required by Israeli law. It was actually Jordan that desecrated Jewish holy places when it illegally occupied the eastern part of Jerusalem from 1948 to 1967, and also restricted Christians' visits to their holy places.

⁷ 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.

⁸ In fact, Jews are indigenous to the Land of Israel, with ties to their religious and ancestral homeland that go back almost 4000 years.

Ms. Omeish's actions incited Jew- and Israel-hatred in others, further dividing and harming the community she is obligated under FCPS policy to protect. Here are some examples:

- “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.”
- “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.”

Despite knowing the harm she was causing to Jewish families in the FCPS community, Ms. Omeish showed no remorse and refused to issue an apology. She also refused to remove her Facebook and Twitter posts. Instead, she actually claimed to be the wronged party – that she was being accused of bias because she is “not white and blonde enough.”

Ms. Omeish's actions were antisemitic, based on the [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance \(IHRA\) working definition of antisemitism](#) that is used by the U.S. government and many countries and institutions here and around the world – and she exploited her official position to engage in it. 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. Yet FCPS officials failed to acknowledge and address Ms. Omeish's antisemitism, even though her conduct violated FCPS's Code of Conduct.

The [Code of Conduct](#) requires school board members to act with “integrity in all matters” and “support the full development of all children and the welfare of the community.” School board members are 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.” The Code also imposes requirements on the superintendent, to “maintain an open, responsive, and welcoming environment,” and to “effectively handle complaints.”

Many members of the FCPS community urged the superintendent and the school board to condemn the posts and demand that Ms. Omeish remove them. 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 FCPS official publicly condemned or even acknowledged that Ms. Omeish was impermissibly using her platform as a school board member for her personal and partisan gain, and thereby harming members of the FCPS community.

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, including the problems ignited and fueled by Ms. Omeish. Also, rather than keep the focus exclusively on antisemitism, FCPS diluted the statement by including a condemnation of Islamophobia, too.

This was not the way FCPS responded to bigotry targeting other groups. Its March 22, 2021 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, 2021 – focused on the Derek Chauvin murder trial and condemned racism. But FCPS failed to give antisemitism the same singular focus it deserved.

Instead of holding Ms. Omeish accountable for breaching her obligations to the FCPS community, FCPS actually elevated her. On June 7, 2021, Ms. Omeish 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.

FCPS’s inaction seemingly emboldened Ms. Omeish. When she spoke at the graduation, to a school community that is one of the most diverse in FCPS, she once again misused her position 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 she repeated her speech in Arabic and 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 provocative and threatening 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.

FCPS’s indifference to Ms. Omeish’s misuse of her platform for personal and partisan gain emboldened others to engage in similar conduct. At the Justice High School graduation, the senior class president led the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. Instead of reciting the correct words, “one nation, under God,” the class president said instead, “one nation, under Allah,” deliberately alienating the non-Muslims in attendance.⁹

⁹ Though not directly relevant to this complaint alleging antisemitism, it is instructive that Abrar Omeish has exhibited bigotry not only toward Jews but also other traditionally targeted groups. In June 2021, she met with members of the Pride Liberation Project, a student-run group of Queer and allied students in FCPS. The meeting was supposed to be a constructive conversation about the prejudice that LGBTQIA+ students face in FCPS and the school board’s role to support Queer students. But according to a statement issued by the Pride Liberation Project on July 16, 2021, Ms. Omeish “implied” throughout the meeting “that being Queer is a lifestyle and a choice. She claimed that it would be a ‘challenge’ for her to provide an ‘outward endorsement or encouragement’ of Queer students, and that there was a ‘difference between going after oppression and endorsing’ LGBTQIA+ students.” Ms. Omeish “created a deeply hurtful and traumatic environment” for the members of the Pride Liberation Project

FCPS's Recent Steps are Completely Inadequate

Perhaps in reaction to the ZOA's letter last June and to complaints from Jewish parents and others, FCPS has taken some recent steps to understand and address antisemitism, but they barely scratch the surface. As discussed above, FCPS's attempt to accommodate the religious observance of its Jewish students, teachers and their families was an abysmal failure. Furthermore, though sorely needed, FCPS's training and educational efforts about antisemitism have been meager and insufficient.

On July 2, 2021, concerned Jewish parents met with FCPS's chief equity advisor who is responsible for creating the anti-bias and anti-racist curriculum in FCPS. To her credit, the chief equity advisor reportedly admitted to these parents that while the Equity & Cultural Responsiveness team is equipped to address racism against people of color, the team lacks the knowledge and qualifications to understand, educate about, and respond effectively to antisemitism.

Ignorance about Jewish concerns was palpable when one Jewish parent met with two FCPS officials in August 2021, to express her concerns. One of the officials, who was part of FCPS's equity team, repeatedly referred to "Jew students" during the meeting – a wrong, ignorant and hurtful way to refer to Jewish students. The Jewish parent sent a follow-up email to explain politely why the use of the "Jew student" phrase was inappropriate. To her credit, the FCPS official apologized and committed to learn and do better. But if this member of the equity team at FCPS does not even know how to refer properly to Jews in her community, then it is highly unlikely that she understands the many problems they have been facing or is equipped to devise and implement helpful solutions.

Reportedly, the JCRC recently partnered with the Anti-Defamation League to provide training on antisemitism to the FCPS equity team. Two 90-minute training sessions took place, the first in September 2021 and the second in October 2021. While this is a positive step, a total of three hours' training for an equity team completely lacking in information and knowledge about antisemitism and other Jewish concerns is hardly enough. Furthermore, FCPS has not created any training opportunities for teachers, other staff, and students, so that they can recognize antisemitism when it occurs and address it promptly and effectively.

FCPS should have provided such training to teachers and staff at its annual equity symposium, which took place on September 25, 2021, but it didn't. While the symposium reportedly covered other forms of bigotry, including discrimination against the Asian and LGBTQ communities, it failed to include anything about antisemitism. Adding insult to injury, FCPS held this symposium on a Saturday, which meant that observant Jewish staff could not attend.

We respectfully urge you to investigate the longstanding practice and pattern of antisemitic hostility and discrimination in FCPS and hold FCPS accountable under Title VI of

"through her repeated insensitive statements," the group said in its statement. Yet FCPS officials did not condemn her bigoted actions here either and she remains a member of the school board, without suffering any consequences for breaching her obligation to support all children and the welfare of the entire FCPS community.

the Civil Rights Act for failing to effectively address these problems. Please contact us at (212) 481-1500 or by email at mklein@zoa.org (Morton Klein) or stuchman@zoa.org (Susan Tuchman) if you have questions or need additional information. Jewish members of the FCPS community are counting on OCR to ensure that Jewish students in FCPS are finally provided with the safe and welcoming learning environment that they are legally entitled to and that every student deserves.

Thank you for your attention to this serious matter. We look forward to your response.

Very truly yours,

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

Morton A. Klein
National President

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Susan B. Tuchman". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent initial "S".

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