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SNOWBALLING ANTI-SEMITISM PROMPTS BRANDEIS CENTER/ADL TO EXPAND CIVIL RIGHTS COMPLAINT AGAINST BERKELEY K-12 SCHOOLS

Washington, D.C. (May 6, 2024) – The [Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law](#) and ADL (the [Anti-Defamation League](#)) today expanded their [complaint](#) against the Berkeley Unified School District (BUSD), sounding the alarm that the already-hostile environment for Jewish students is taking a frightening turn for the worse.

In February, the two organizations filed a [complaint](#) with the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) against the Berkeley school district for failing to take action to end the nonstop bullying and harassment of Jewish students by peers and teachers. Incidents included calls to “kill the Jews” and “eliminate Israel” and Jewish students being asked what “their number is,” referring to Nazi concentration camps, derided for their physical appearance, or told “I don’t like your people” and “Of course it was the Jews.” During an unauthorized teacher-promoted walkout for Palestine, no teachers intervened as students shouted, “Kill the Jews,” “KKK,” “Kill Israel,” and “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.”

The complaint documented how BUSD teachers are weaponizing disciplines such as art and history to promote anti-Semitic tropes about Israel. At Berkeley High School, a history teacher screened an anti-Zionist video and forced students to analyze Israel as an apartheid state. This teacher sharply squelched dissent, stating that materials which oppose the apartheid narrative are “laughable.” A high school art teacher showed students violent pro-Hamas videos and displayed anti-Israel and anti-Semitic images during class, including a fist punching through a Star of David. Indoctrination attempts occur in classes for young children. In one second-grade classroom, a teacher hung a Palestinian flag in the window and encouraged students to write “Stop Bombing Babies” on sticky notes to be posted next to the classroom of the only Jewish teacher.

At the time, Jewish students reported being worried about mob violence, including being “jumped” at school. Many said they removed their Stars of David and no longer wear Jewish camp t-shirts, and that they were learning to keep their heads down, hide their Judaism and move through their school days in fear. Some students left the district due to this pervasive bullying.

After three additional months of silence and inaction from Berkeley authorities, according to the Brandeis Center and ADL, the environment has become even more hostile and threatening. For example, since the original complaint was filed:

- “Kill Jews” was scrawled in a Berkeley High School bathroom. BUSD did not issue a statement denouncing Jew hatred or expressing a zero-tolerance policy for threats of violence against Jewish members of the school community.
- “Kill all Zionists” was written at the bus stop used by many Berkeley High School students to get to and from school; the hateful vandalism remained for days after it was reported. Again, BUSD made no statement denouncing the violent and threatening rhetoric against the Jewish and Israeli members of the school community.
- A first-grader heard older children on the playground saying “Jews are stupid.” The six-year-old told his mother that he wishes he were not Jewish because people do not like Jews. Since the incident, he has not wanted to go to school. Instead of intervening, the school principal suggested the six-year-old speak with the older bullies to resolve the problem.
- A ninth-grader faced bullying and taunting after his parent reported anti-Semitic incidents. On a public and widely circulated social media post, an upper-level high school student targeted the Jewish ninth-grader, calling him a “dumbass” who is “blatantly lying cuz he loves genocide that much.” This message was then re-posted by other students and received countless views. BUSD took no discernable action in response.
- The art teacher who created a hostile environment for Jewish and Israeli students was finally put on leave after dozens of major media outlets, including CNN, reported on the anti-Semitism in his classroom. Since then, posters have appeared tacked on walls all over the high school building with an image of the teacher and the caption “Bring Mr. ____ Back.” Instead of addressing the inappropriate posters, the principal sent “shoutouts” to all students and faculty, praising the teacher.

- During a cooking lesson on Palestinian food, a seventh-grade teacher forced her students to listen to a podcast that demonized Israel and the Jews, included false information, and presented a libelous narrative about Israelis “stealing” land, appropriating recipes, and engaging in “ethnic cleansing of Palestinians.” This type of propaganda not only demonizes and damages the Jewish and Israeli students in the class, it instills a hatred of Israel and Jews into all students, perpetuating the cycle of anti-Semitic hostility throughout the District. When parents complained, the school failed to respond.
- In March, a high school teacher posted political propaganda in her classroom including a QR code for a Gaza Genocide Action Toolkit that accuses Israel of genocide, tells readers to support the Boycott, Divest, and Sanction (BDS) movement, which seeks the elimination of Israel, to “make sure everyone knows that Israel is mass murdering Palestinian families with our tax dollars,” and to tell Congress “they have blood on their hands.” It also characterizes the ADL as “a right-wing organization that uses inflammatory, racist rhetoric to mislead the public, cover up Israel’s war crimes, and smear activists for Palestinian rights.”
- Ethnic Studies teachers began presenting unapproved, biased, and anti-Semitic propaganda in the classroom that further marginalizes Jewish and Israeli students. A vocabulary list given to students defines “Anti-Zionist” as a person who “believe[s] in a future where all people on the land live in freedom, safety and equality,” Hamas as an “Islamic Resistance Movement;” and Hamas’ brutal acts of terror as “armed resistance.” The list includes terms like “apartheid,” “ethnic cleansing,” “occupation,” and “settler colonialism,” which are commonly used to demonize Israel.
- A group of BUSD teachers wrote an inflammatory and divisive letter to the school board after the Brandeis Center/ADL complaint was filed, characterizing parents who reported incidents of anti-Semitism at BUSD as “extreme” community members and “oppressors,” and labeling their efforts to protect their children as “part of the Zionist playbook.” They also asserted that “[t]he ADL is known as ‘Israel’s attack dogs’ in the US.”
- A “BUSD for a Ceasefire in Palestine” walkout, promoted by teachers, took place during school hours at Berkeley High School. School resources and facilities were used to organize the walkout and staff attended along with students.
- While posters displaying anti-Israel propaganda and promoting anti-Semitism are left untouched, posters condemning anti-Semitism and supporting Israel’s right to exist are ripped down from the hallways of Berkeley High School without investigation or consequences.

“Dereliction of duty doesn’t even come close to describing what we are seeing in Berkeley; it is disgusting and shameful,” stated Kenneth L. Marcus, founder and chairman of the Brandeis Center and the former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education for Civil Rights for the George W. Bush and Donald Trump administrations. “The Berkeley Superintendent and the School Board are either completely incompetent or they are willfully ignoring their job. If even one of these incidents was happening to any other minority group it would be promptly addressed, with consequences, not ignored and permitted to snowball out of control when it comes to the safety of Jewish students.”

“The blatant disregard by BUSD of this continuing anti-Semitic harassment, bullying and rhetoric is inexcusable,” said Jonathan Greenblatt, ADL CEO. “Jewish students are hiding their identities and are afraid to go to school – this is outrageous, unacceptable, and should not be happening in 2024. The Berkeley School District must be held accountable for their inaction and seeming indifference to addressing this hostile school environment and must do more to ensure the safety of Jewish students.”

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination based on race, color and national origin, including discrimination against Jews on the basis of their actual or perceived shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics, in educational institutions that receive federal funding. Under the law, harassing, marginalizing, demonizing, and excluding Jewish students based on the Zionist component of their Jewish identity is unlawful. UNESCO has cautioned that “Jew” and “Zionist” are often used interchangeably today in an attempt by anti-Semites to cloak their hate. President Biden’s U.S. National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism, released in May 2023, observed that “Jewish students and educators are targeted for derision and exclusion on college campuses, often because of their real or perceived views about the State of Israel. When Jews are targeted because of their beliefs or their identity, when Israel is singled out because of anti-Jewish hatred, that is antisemitism. And that is unacceptable.”

The Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law is an independent, unaffiliated, nonprofit corporation established to advance the civil and human rights of the Jewish people and promote justice for all. LDB engages in research, education, and legal advocacy to combat the resurgence of anti-Semitism on college and university campuses, in the workplace, and elsewhere. It empowers students by training them to understand their legal rights and educates administrators and employers on best practices to combat racism and anti-Semitism. More at www.brandeiscenter.com

ADL is the leading anti-hate organization in the world. Founded in 1913, its timeless mission is “to stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all.” Today, ADL continues to fight all forms of antisemitism and bias, using innovation and partnerships to drive impact. A global leader in combating antisemitism, countering extremism and battling bigotry wherever and whenever it happens, ADL works to protect democracy and ensure a just and inclusive society for all. More at www.adl.org.