



Contact: Brandeis Center, Nicole Rosen 202-309-5724
ADL, Todd Gutnick 212-885-7755 | adlmedia@adl.org

BRANDEIS CENTER/ADL FILE FEDERAL COMPLAINT AGAINST BERKELEY K-12 SCHOOLS FOR “SEVERE AND PERSISTENT” ANTI-SEMITIC BULLYING

Washington, D.C., Feb. 28, 2024: [The Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law](#) and ADL (the [Anti-Defamation League](#)) today filed a [complaint](#) with the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights against the Berkeley Unified School District (BUSD) for failing to take action to end nonstop bullying and harassment of Jewish students by peers and teachers since Oct. 7. According to the complaint, Berkeley administrators have ignored parent reports and knowingly allowed its K-12 schools to become hostile environments for Jewish and Israeli students.

Incidents include students repeatedly hearing anti-Semitic comments in classrooms and hallways, such as “kill the Jews,” non-Jewish students asking Jewish students what “their number is,” referring to numbers tattooed on Jews during the Holocaust, and Jewish students being derided for their physical appearance and demonized as evil. Students have also had to endure anti-Semitic teacher rants and class activities, teacher-promoted “walkouts” that praise Hamas, and even a second-grade teacher leading a classroom activity where children were writing “Stop Bombing Babies” on sticky notes to display in the building.

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

Parents have repeatedly reported anti-Semitic incidents to the administration, but BUSD has done nothing to address, much less curtail, the hostile environment that has plagued BUSD for more than four months. Instead of addressing teachers’ anti-Semitic behavior, BUSD officials have chosen to disrupt the Jewish students by moving them into new classes, further ostracizing and marginalizing them from their peers, and normalizing anti-Semitic behavior.

“The eruption of anti-Semitism in Berkeley’s elementary and high schools is like nothing I’ve ever seen before,” said Kenneth L. Marcus, chairman of the Brandeis Center and the former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education for the George W. Bush and Donald Trump administrations. “It is dangerous enough to see faculty fanning the flames of anti-Semitism on college campuses, but to see teachers inciting hate in the youngest of grades while Berkeley administrators sit idly by as it continues to escalate by the day is reprehensible. Where is the accountability? Where are the people who are supposed to protect and educate students?”

“It is beyond deplorable that in a moment of rising anti-Semitism both here in the U.S. and abroad that teachers and administrators at BUSD are falling down in their obligation to protect Jewish students,” said Jonathan Greenblatt, ADL CEO. “There is no more solemn or basic obligation than protecting our children from the moment when they walk into the doors of their schools, and to fail so monumentally that children feel forced to hide their Jewish identity for fear of reprisal is downright shocking. We must demand more from our educational leaders.”

Teacher-Organized Walkouts

Berkeley K-12 teachers have used BUSD resources and facilities to promote, support, and organize walkouts and activities denigrating Israelis and calling for the elimination of Jews. Walkouts have taken place during school hours and have entailed students leaving their classrooms, missing lessons, and exiting school buildings without parent permission.

While many schools permit excused absences only for “illness, medical appointments, funerals, religious holidays and court appearances,” teachers have offered students excused walkout absences to encourage attendance at rallies, leaving one or two Jewish students in class alone and without instruction.

Teachers watched from the sidelines while students shouted vile anti-Semitic chants, such as “Kill the Jews,” F--- the Jews,” F--- Israel,” “KKK,” “Kill Israel,” “I hate those people,” and “From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be free,” a chant deemed anti-Semitic for its call for the removal of all Jews from the State of Israel.

Anti-Semitic Bullying by Teachers During Class

One high school art teacher spent significant class time imposing his anti-Semitic views on students, showing them violent pro-Hamas videos, projecting anti-Israel and anti-Semitic images during class, and papering his classroom walls with these images. In one image, a fist holding a Palestinian flag is seen punching through a Star of David. Other examples illustrated clear celebrations of the Hamas massacre and images that condone violence against civilians. While the principal assured parents that the inflammatory and anti-Semitic materials would be removed, they remain on classroom walls.

A high school history teacher regularly expresses anti-Semitic stereotypes and defamations in class and goes on long anti-Israel tirades. For example, the teacher recently called Israel an “apartheid” state. And she recently required her students to respond to the following prompt in class: “To what extent should Israel be considered an Apartheid State?” She then showed a one-sided anti-Israel video to her class, claiming she could not find one that presented the Israeli side and that articles that oppose the apartheid narrative were “laughable.”

A second-grade teacher taught a lesson where students were instructed to write “messages of anti-hate” on sticky notes to hang in the school hallway. The teacher wrote, “Stop Bombing Babies,” on her sticky note, and many second-graders followed suit, writing “Stop Bombing Babies” on theirs. These notes were then displayed, not outside the teacher’s own classroom, but outside the classroom of the only Jewish teacher in the school.

Peer-on-Peer Bullying

According to the complaint, “peer-on-peer anti-Semitic bullying has escalated, as students are emboldened to emulate their teachers and perpetuate the hostility against their Jewish classmates.”

Some examples cited in the complaint include how, after a Jewish student presented a project related to his Jewish ancestry, a peer student crossed out the word “Jewish” on the presentation handout and wrote “free free Palestine.” Another Jewish student was told, “You have a big nose because you are a stupid Jew” and “I don’t like your people.” That student was also told that his traditions are dumb and not welcome. Another student was called a “midget Jew,” and after a mistake was made by a few students during a lab experiment, a student commented aloud, “of course it was the Jews.”

BUSD Ignores Parent Complaints

While BUSD has received a record number of complaints of anti-Semitism since Oct. 7, including a letter signed by 1,370 Berkeley community members to the Berkeley Superintendent and Board of Education, it has ignored parent concerns, refused to discipline teachers and students who have engaged in anti-Semitic harassment, and failed to ensure the physical safety or mental well-being of the victims, many of whom are young children.

Instead of addressing the anti-Semitism occurring in classes, principals moved offended students to other classes, which caused major schedule disruptions for students who spoke out, or offered to have them sit in the health center or library, making Jewish students feel isolated, marginalized, and ostracized, and putting them in the role of defending verbal attacks from peers against Jews and Israel. According to the complaint, forcing these students to move to new classes mid-semester has only allowed the teachers’ anti-Semitic rhetoric to infect the remaining students, while forcing Jewish students to catch up on class material they missed during the first half of the semester, adjust to new teachers and rooms full of new students, and manage emotions associated with mid-semester moves. Jewish and Israeli students were also left isolated and abandoned during walkouts with no educational instruction.

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 just as unlawful and discriminatory as attacking a Jewish student for observing the Sabbath or keeping kosher. UNESCO has cautioned that “Jew” and “Zionist” are often used interchangeably today in an attempt by anti-Semites to cloak their hate.

The Brandeis Center and ADL, along with other Jewish organizations, recently filed a [lawsuit](#) to stop anti-Semitic content from being taught in Santa Ana, California public schools. Both organizations, along with Hillel International, Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher LLP, and other leading law firms and Jewish organizations, launched the [Campus Antisemitism Legal Line \(CALL\)](#), a free legal protection helpline for college students who have experienced anti-Semitism.

The Department of Education is currently investigating Brandeis Center complaints filed against [Wellesley](#), [SUNY New Paltz](#), the [University of Southern California \(USC\)](#), [Brooklyn College](#), and the [University of Illinois](#), and the Brandeis Center recently filed federal complaints against the [University of California](#), for anti-Semitism at UC Berkeley, and [American University](#).