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Santa Ana Public Schools Prevented from Teaching Anti-Semitic Ethnic Studies

School District Settles Lawsuit Brought by Brandeis Center, ADL, and AJC Alleging Ethnic Studies Courses were Developed in Secret and Infected with Anti-Semitism

(Santa Ana, Calif., February 20, 2025) – Major Jewish organizations on February 20 announced that the Santa Ana Unified School District (SAUSD) has agreed to settle a [lawsuit](#) brought against the school district for introducing ethnic studies courses that were developed in secret and infected with anti-Semitism.

As part of the [settlement](#), SAUSD will cease instruction of Ethnic Studies World Geography, Ethnic Studies World Histories, and Ethnic Studies: Perspectives, Identities, and Social Justice until the courses are re-designed with the opportunity for public input in accordance with California’s open meeting laws. The courses contained false and damaging narratives about Israel and the Jewish people. Anti-Semitic content will be removed from Ethnic Studies World Histories so that the course can continue being taught for the remainder of this school year only.

SAUSD also agreed to recognize the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a controversial issue and to strictly adhere to the two policies -- [Board Policy 6144 Controversial Issues](#) and [Administrative Regulation 6144 Controversial Issues](#) – that apply when teaching such issues. Under these policies, teaching must be based on fact and allow for alternative views; teachers must ensure all sides of a controversial issue are impartially presented; students must be taught to separate opinion from fact; and no teacher or speaker may use the classroom or materials to advocate their own religious, political, economic or social views.

In addition, the SAUSD Ethnic Studies Steering Committee will be permanently disbanded; the district will stop working with the outside consultant who expressed anti-Semitic views; and SAUSD will allow for meaningful, substantive input from members of the public before any new courses are presented to the Board for approval.

The lawsuit was filed a year ago in the Superior Court in Orange County, California, by the Brandeis Center, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), and the American Jewish Committee (AJC), on behalf of the Brandeis Center and its membership group, So-CUE, comprised of Orange County and Santa Ana residents, alleging SAUSD had violated California’s open meeting laws to approve these biased, anti-Semitic courses. With outside counsel from Covington & Burling LLP aggressively pursuing discovery from the District, the Jewish organizations [uncovered](#) anti-Semitic statements by Board and Committee members through depositions, affidavits, documents, text messages, and emails.

For example, Ethnic Studies Steering Committee officials mused about using Jewish holidays to approve courses at the board level to make it difficult or impossible for Jews to attend. The pejorative term “Jewish Question” appeared on a committee agenda. Members of the Steering Committee reportedly said, “Jews are the oppressors” and do not belong in ethnic studies, referred to Jewish organizations as “racist” and urged that SAUSD not “cave” to their concerns. That same committee member reportedly refused to call Hamas a terrorist organization even after the October 7 terrorist attack, arguing that it would be “dehumaniz[ing]” to call Hamas members “terrorists.” Another Committee leader referred to the only Jewish member as a “colonized Jewish mind” and a “f---ing baby” for expressing concerns over anti-Semitism on the Committee.

The Steering Committee also hired an external ethnic studies consultant who equated Israel with “settler colonialism” and used social media to actively promote anti-Israel bias with anti-Semitic tropes, including a post about “Zionist control” and a comment that “the Zionist CA Jewish Caucus hijacked Ethnic Studies.”

Jewish staff at SAUSD complained about the “thinly veiled antisemitism” coming from Steering Committee leaders and the hurtful comments said about Jews. When members of the community discovered the covert actions of the school board to approve the material, they appeared at a meeting to publicly comment but were harassed with anti-Semitism. For example, classic anti-Semitic tropes as well as threatening and violent language were used against Jews; applause broke out in response to anti-Semitic slurs; audience members hissed as the names of Jewish attendees were called; a Jewish speaker was called racist; a Jewish student who spoke at the meeting was derided as a “Jew boy;” and another speaker was followed to her car and harassed by a meeting attendee.

Under the Brown Act (California’s open meeting law), AB 101 (the statute making ethnic studies a requirement for high school graduation), and other California state and federal laws, school districts are required to create courses free from bias, bigotry and discrimination, and allow for public input before approving new courses.

The Brandeis Center, ADL, AJC, and Covington & Burling LLP served as the plaintiffs’ counsel for this case. The StandWithUs Saidoff Legal Department supported the litigation as legal consultant.

“Ethnic studies should never become a vehicle for sneaking dangerous, anti-Semitic materials into our schools. That is the law, plain and simple, and we’re glad to have stopped this in Santa Ana schools” said Brandeis Center Vice Chair L. Rachel Lerman. “Unfortunately, this dangerous and deceitful behavior is being attempted in other school districts as well. This should serve as a cautionary tale. We are watching those jurisdictions and will not hesitate to address similar violations of the law. School boards must operate in the light of day, and not ‘under the radar’ as SAUSD described its own conduct.”

“Anti-Semitism has no place in our communities – and especially not in our schools. Here, Santa Ana, CA’s past Board & Committee members knew that anti-Semitism was infecting their curriculum process, and intentionally excluded the public from it,” said James Pasch, ADL Vice President, National Litigation. “Open meeting laws exist to prevent exactly what unfolded in Santa Ana. This case sends a message – not just in Santa Ana, but from coast-to-coast – that if school leaders proceed with implementing anti-Semitic curriculum and material in violation of the law, we will use the courts to protect the community.”

“This case should serve as a warning to other California districts that try to conceal ethnic studies materials that are anti-Zionist or outright anti-Semitic,” said AJC Chief Legal Officer Marc Stern. “Ethnic studies are acceptable only if adopted in the light of day and, if in the end, all sides of a controversial issue are taught by educators free of judgment. Classrooms must be places for education, not indoctrination.”

Roz Rothstein, co-founder and CEO StandWithUs, said, “It has been our privilege to provide legal support to this effort. This lawsuit allowed us to uncover serious issues with the SAUSD’s implementation of California’s ethnic studies laws, leading to the critical results of ensuring that anti-Semitic material will no longer be included in these courses and improving the district’s process for adopting such future courses.”

Daniel Shallman, lead counsel for the plaintiffs from Covington & Burling LLP, added: “We are honored to have joined forces with the ADL, Brandeis, AJC, and StandWithUs to hold SAUSD to account for egregious violations of California’s open meeting laws. The settlement will bring necessary sunlight to SAUSD’s curriculum development process and will ensure that biased, anti-Semitic content will stay out of the classroom.”

***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 antisemitism 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 antisemitism. The Brandeis Center is not affiliated with the Massachusetts university, the Kentucky law school, or any of the other institutions that share the name and honor the memory of the late U.S. Supreme Court justice. <https://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. www.adl.org*

***AJC** is the global advocacy organization for the Jewish people. With headquarters in New York, 25 offices across the United States, 14 overseas posts, as well as partnerships with 38 Jewish community organizations worldwide, AJC’s mission is to enhance the well-being of the Jewish people and Israel, and to advance human rights and democratic values in the United States and around the world. <https://www.ajc.org>*

***StandWithUs (SWU)** is an international non-partisan education organization that inspires people of all ages about Israel, challenges misinformation and fights against antisemitism. SWU empowers people around the world to educate others through social media, print and digital materials in different languages, through educational programs and conferences, weekly newsletters, data and analytics, and missions to Israel. It takes legal action through the StandWithUs Saidoff Legal Department. It empowers hundreds of student leaders annually through its college Fellowship and high school Internship. SWU provides schools and educators with vital tools through its IsraelLINK middle school program, Holocaust Education Center, and K-12 Fairness Center. Founded in 2001 and headquartered in Los Angeles, StandWithUs has chapters throughout the U.S., and the world. <https://www.standwithus.com/>*

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