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May 7, 2024

The Honorable Virginia Foxx  
Chairwoman, Committee on Education and the  
Workforce  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Aaron Bean  
Chairman, Subcommittee on Early Childhood,  
Elementary and Secondary Education  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Bobby Scott  
Ranking Member, Committee on Education and  
the Workforce  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Suzanne Bonamici  
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Early  
Childhood, Elementary and Secondary  
Education  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Scott, Subcommittee Chairman Bean, and Subcommittee  
Ranking Member Bonamici:

The Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington (JCRC) is pleased to submit this letter regarding the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education's May 8, 2024 hearing titled "Confronting Pervasive Antisemitism in K-12 Schools," which will focus in part on Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS).

As the leading grassroots Jewish agency immersed in addressing antisemitism within MCPS, the JCRC has a singular perspective on the school district's history on this issue over the last several years. In our assessment, MCPS has begun to address its troubled track record, taking meaningful steps to alter its internal culture and approach to school-based antisemitism. However, much work remains to be done.

[The JCRC's K-12 education outreach portfolio](#)

The Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington (JCRC), representing over 100 constituent Jewish agencies, organizations and synagogues in the District of Columbia, Northern Virginia, and suburban Maryland, is the chief advocate for the organized local Jewish community to elected officials, government agencies, other faith and ethnic communities, and the media. Founded in 1938, the JCRC's mission is to foster a society based on freedom, justice, and democratic pluralism, that allows Jews and all people to live safely and flourish. The agency's work encompasses legislative advocacy, government affairs, Israel education, interfaith/intergroup relations, Holocaust commemoration and education, and school-based outreach, programming, and advocacy.

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The JCRC's education outreach and programming department engages with 10 separate public school districts and hundreds of private sectarian and independent schools throughout the greater Washington D.C. region. The department's mission is to combat school-based antisemitism; advocate on behalf of Jewish students, families, and employees; and promote safe, hate-free, respectful learning environments for all students. Our multi-faceted strategies to reduce and prevent school-based antisemitism reach all stakeholders in our local school systems, through:

- advocacy to regional superintendents, senior administrators, and school boards
- direct response to antisemitic incidents
- partnering with school districts to implement improved education on Jewish identity and history, antisemitism, the Holocaust, and Israel
- curriculum Monitoring and Consultation
- educator trainings
- creation and implementation of impactful student anti-bias education and empowerment programs, including our highly regarded Student to Student peer-education initiative

### JCRC's extensive engagement with MCPS

Antisemitic incidents throughout MCPS rose steadily beginning in late 2016, spiking to alarming levels in the 2022-2023 year, and reaching unprecedented numbers in the weeks and months following Hamas' October 7<sup>th</sup> attack on Israel.

Throughout this over 7-year period, the JCRC has intensified its engagement at all levels within MCPS, to not only respond to incidents as they occurred but to advocate for swift action to improve the district's capacity to meaningfully address antisemitism.

MCPS' challenges in effectively and forthrightly confronting antisemitism have resulted in harm to Jewish students and employees. However, even as we share with you the extent of these shortcomings, we must emphasize that in our belief, they represent only the beginning of the story of MCPS and its approach to antisemitism, not its conclusion. It would be a discredit to MCPS, the JCRC, and the many other organizations and MCPS stakeholders engaged on this issue to not recognize the significant efforts that have been undertaken over the last several years to address this crisis. While there have been administrators, educators, and district leaders who were either unable or unwilling to act, there have also been many MCPS professionals of good will who are sincerely troubled by what Jewish students and employees continue to endure, and who have – and continue --- to work collaboratively and openly to change the status quo.

### Challenges

MCPS was slow to recognize and respond to changing trends regarding antisemitism.

1. Leaders and educators suffered from widespread lack of basic cultural competency regarding Jews, Jewish history, the unique nature of antisemitism and anti-Zionism, and Israel.
2. Policies and procedures related to incident reporting and student discipline were outdated.

3. Principals received inadequate support when incidents occurred and were often left to implement interventions on their own.
4. Holocaust education and other curricula related to antisemitism and the American Jewish experience were implemented inconsistently, with very little exposure to students younger than 8<sup>th</sup> grade – this despite the proliferation of antisemitic incidents involving Nazi symbols and imagery at MCPS middle schools.
5. A new restorative justice initiative was rolled out without adequately considering and planning for the implementation of RJ strategies in antisemitism-related incidents.
6. In general, the district maintained a defensive, opaque approach to confronting antisemitic incidents when they occurred, with poor communication to stakeholders.

These challenges existed long before October 7<sup>th</sup>, and they deeply impacted MCPS' ability to respond quickly, effectively, and sensitively in the first days and weeks after Hamas' horrific attack on Israel, when our local Jewish community was consumed by grief, shock, and fear. As Subcommittee Members likely know, the JCRC and the ADL publicly criticized MCPS for its delayed and inadequate initial response. However, in the months since then, MCPS has taken steps to support Jewish students, most prominently by suspending four teachers who openly displayed hateful messages on email and social media platforms. Our work with the school district is intensive and ongoing.

#### Steps taken; progress made

MCPS and the JCRC have collaborated on the following steps to strengthen the district's ability to address and prevent antisemitic behavior and speech among students of all ages:

- As far back as early 2020, MCPS, with significant input from the JCRC, revised its incident reporting and response process, to separate out bias-motivated acts from the larger category of "bullying," and streamline procedures.
- The JCRC and its partners at the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) have together presented to over 1,500 MCPS educators our 3-hour training module on Jewish identity, antisemitism, anti-Zionism, and recognizing and correctly responding to implicit and explicit bias against Jews. In August 2023, in response to several difficult, highly publicized antisemitic incidents at Whitman High School, the JCRC and ADL were invited to present a mandatory training to all Whitman cluster educators. We also trained the entire faculty of Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School, which had faced similarly challenging antisemitic incidents during the 2022-2023 academic year. JCRC and ADL professionals consulted closely on an ongoing basis with both the Whitman and BCC principals to help them take concrete steps to change the culture at their schools. We note that the JCRC has received no incident reports regarding Whitman High School, and only one or two reports, both involving vandalism, regarding BCC this year.
- In fall 2023 the JCRC presented a customized antisemitism training for MCPS' Central Office restorative justice and mental health professionals, which included expert instruction and facilitation on understanding the impact of intergenerational trauma on Jewish students. In addition, we presented a training to over 200 school-based restorative justice leads.
- Our agency also trained MCPS social studies coordinators specifically on strategies for interrupting antisemitism in the classroom.

- Also in fall 2023, MCPS, with input from the JCRC and other organizations introduced revisions to elementary and middle school social studies curricula to expose students at younger ages to the American Jewish experience, antisemitism, and the Holocaust.
- As a result of extensive engagement with principals, more of them are attuned to antisemitism as a core equity issue, know how to access resources from community groups such as the JCRC, and can therefore respond more quickly and assertively to incidents as they occur.
- At the JCRC's recommendation, several members of MCPS' senior staff, including equity and restorative justice directors, will be participating in a pilot program for K-12 leaders at George Washington University's annual Fellowship and Summer Institute on Antisemitism and Jewish Inclusion in Educational Settings.

### The work ahead

Much work remains to be done to address and prevent antisemitism within MCPS.

- All MCPS educators must receive mandated training on antisemitism and anti-Zionism; in its recently concluded 2024 session, the Maryland General Assembly passed legislation to require anti-bias training that covers antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of hatred, and it is our understanding that such training will be implemented for the first time in the 2024-2025 academic year
- The disciplinary process must be more transparent – thought must be given to strategies for balancing privacy requirements with the need for parents and other stakeholders to feel confident that meaningful actions are taken to respond to incidents and that perpetrators actually receive consequences.
- As a general matter, there must be greater accountability and transparency throughout MCPS, especially in communications with parents
- The implementation of Holocaust education must be improved, both in content and in consistency of delivery across the school district. MCPS should be required to track and report annually on its activities in this area.
- There must be clear and consistent messaging from school district leaders on a zero tolerance policy for antisemitism wherever and however it manifests, including when it presents as anti-Zionism. To be clear, criticism of the Israeli government is not antisemitic. Chants and other types of harassment that reference the destruction of Israel, the purging of Jews from the area of land that is Israel, and the delegitimization of the Jewish state, ARE antisemitic, and must not be allowed. Jewish students must be able to attend school without feeling terrified and threatened.
- MCPS must strengthen its equity-related departments and its ability to handle and process complaints and incident reports from caregivers, students, and employees.

## Conclusion

The current crisis of school-based antisemitism is unprecedented in this country. It bears uncomfortable echoes of other places and times when even the most sophisticated, Western societies turned on their Jewish populations, wreaking wholesale systematic bloodshed and destruction, traumas that remain imprinted on today's Jewish youth.

Disrupting this alarming trajectory will require all people of good will, regardless of political affiliation, to work together to develop and implement practical, impactful solutions. Critically, it will require leaders to resist efforts to politicize an issue that cannot afford to be the provenance of any one political party.

Tackling antisemitism requires nuance, courage, patience, and determination. Ingrained prejudices towards marginalized groups defy facile, expedient interventions. But we delay and avoid confronting these dangerous trends at our own --- and our children's --- peril.

We appreciate the desire of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce to shine a light on this societal scourge, which impacts families across our nation each day. We hope that this hearing results not in more division and acrimony, but instead in activating the better angels in each of us, urging us to teach our children to treat each other – to treat every human being -- - with mutual respect, empathy, and kindness.

Sincerely,

Guila Franklin Siegel  
Associate Director

Sara Winkelman  
Director, Education Programs and Services