



Superintendent Dr. Tony B. Watlington, Sr.
Lynn Rauch, General Counsel
The School District of Philadelphia
440 N. Broad Street
Philadelphia, PA 19130

VIA EMAIL: superintendent@philasd.org; legalservice@philasd.org

February 2, 2026

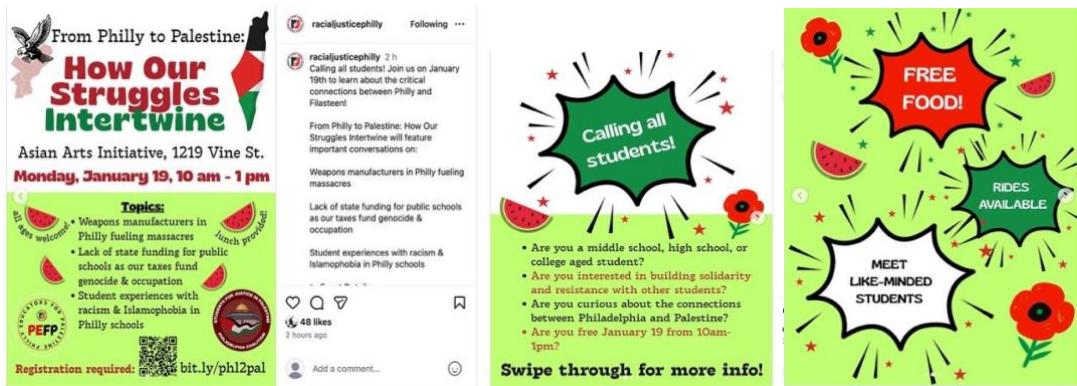
Dear Dr. Watlington, Sr. and Ms. Rauch:

We are writing to request your attention to issues arising from a recent event hosted by Philly Educators for Palestine (“PEFP”) that invited Philadelphia schoolchildren, parents, and educators to a Teach-In entitled “From Philly to Palestine: How Our Struggles Intertwine” (the “Event”).

The topics to be covered by the Event included city funding structure, state taxes, weapon manufacturing, “massacres,” “genocide,” and “occupation.” The Event was held on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a federal holiday when Philadelphia public schools were closed. Event flyers (pictured below) encouraged families to send their children for a day of “free food” and noted that rides were available to the venue.

We respectfully urge you to issue clear guidance reminding Philadelphia School District educators that, while they retain robust rights as private citizens, their speech and conduct are subject to a number of important limitations set by federal, state, city, and District rules that aim to protect all students and their families.

Furthermore, because the Event likely went beyond what is permitted by those rules, we urge you to investigate pursuant to the relevant policies and procedures. Though many were implicated, as described below, we are not aware of any investigation undertaken by the District yet.



As you know, there are robust policies and procedures in place to ensure that all students of the School District of Philadelphia (“SDP”) can access learning spaces that keep them valued, supported and safe. It is critical to ensure that your community is aware of these frameworks, and is assured that your offices will investigate any alleged breaches.

1. Although SDP teachers may speak out on matters of public concern and/or engage in political activity, their “freedom of expression must be balanced against the interest of the District.”¹ **Here, the District has a strong interest in the Event and its repercussions.** The Event sparked tremendous fear in the SDP community, particularly among Jewish and Israeli community members. We understand that large numbers of families and community members contacted all levels in your offices to share security concerns and request clarification. Further, the Event was intended to equip students of all ages, their parents and teachers, with specific action items for use in SDP schools that would require significant analyses by school administrators under discrimination and controversial issues policies.
2. When speaking out about matters of public concern and/or engaging in political activity while not engaged in the performance of professional duties, an SDP teacher may “not direct his/her expression toward any individual(s) with whom s/he would normally be in contact in the performance of duties.”² This is specifically to “avoid the disruption of cooperative staff relationships.”³ **Here, the Event was specifically aimed at engaging - and mobilizing - SDP students, families and other staff members.**
3. When speaking out about matters of public concern and/or engaging in political activity while not engaged in the performance of professional duties, an SDP teacher should refrain from making public expressions that were “made without regard for truth or accuracy.” **Here, the Event was specifically intended to “teach” participants about highly charged and controversial matters, many of which have been entirely**

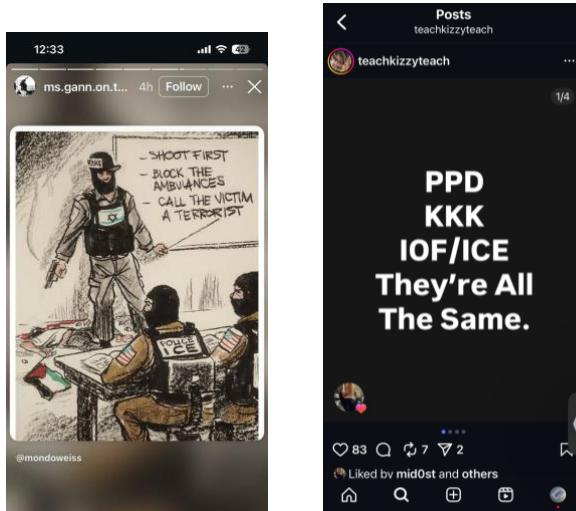
¹ SDP Policy 320 (“Freedom of Speech and Political Activities”) available at https://www.philasd.org/schoolboard/wp-content/uploads/sites/892/2019/07/320_Freedom-of-Speech-and-Political-Activities-in-Non-School-Settings_Policy_May.pdf.

² *Id.* (Guidelines #2)

³ *Id.*

debunked. For example, the claim that Philadelphia schools are underfunded because of District investment in Israel is plain conspiracist misinformation, lacking any evidentiary support. Statements like these are often circulated and reshared by anti-Israel activists without vetting, simply to inflame or ensure emotional reactions by others.

4. Under SDP Policy, teachers can engage in “discussion and study of politics and political issues” if that discussion or study is “appropriate to classroom studies.”⁴ **Here, the organizers of the Event made clear that the content would not be a discussion at all. Rather, the Event was intended to share one very specific and extreme perspective on a highly controversial topic.** Presenting these types of materials on this topic without any additional viewpoints would unquestionably be inappropriate in a classroom, where SDP teachers are required to discuss controversial issues with their students only if “the discussion is free of coercion or bias on the part of the instructor.”⁵ **Here, the bias of certain PEFP educators is clear, both from the charged language in the Event flyer and, further, from their other public-facing statements.** PEFP organizers of the Event are also SDP educators who regularly share shockingly inaccurate, inflammatory anti-Israel language, cartoons and photographs in their social media accounts.⁶ For example:



Though these teachers’ private speech - no matter how provocative or distasteful - is generally protected if it doesn’t cross certain lines, these types of posts are indicative of deep personal biases and blind spots.

5. Under SDP Policy, teachers must “maintain appropriate professional relationships and boundaries with all students at all times, both in and out of the classroom.” They should “exert reasonable effort to protect students from harm.” **The Event organizers have a**

⁴ *Id.* (Guidelines #4).

⁵ SDP Policy 119 (“Controversial Issues”) available at https://www.philasd.org/schoolboard/wp-content/uploads/sites/892/2020/06/119_Controversial-Issues_Policy-6.25.20.pdf.

⁶ See, e.g., “Scapegoating: Blaming Jews for Society’s Problems”, available at <https://standwithus.com/library/booklets/scapegoating-blaming-jews-for-societys-problems/>.

history of posting their students' names and faces on their public social media accounts and privately engaging with them to encourage anti-Israel activism.⁷

6. The District has a strong interest in determining whether the Event's organizers, many of whom are SDP educators, conformed with the relevant policies regarding social media and electronic communications. **It appears that the Event's organizers engaged in inappropriately used social media and other electronic communications to promote a highly controversial Event**, which (a) endangered the "health, safety or welfare" of SDP students, staff members and the general public, (b) damaged "the reputation and image of the School District of Philadelphia as an educational institution," and (c) had a "negative impact on a staff member's ability to effectively perform his/her duties."⁸
7. Under SDP Policy, where a teacher is speaking out about matters of public concern and/or engaging in political activity while not engaged in the performance of professional duties, the teacher should state clearly that the "expression represents personal views and not necessarily those of the school district."⁹ **Here, there is no indication that the SDP educators from PEFP clarified at all that they were speaking from personal perspectives at the Event.**
8. SDP employees may not use their positions of authority to influence students. Whether or not they are literally in the classroom, students are considered "captive audience" members to their teachers. **SDP teachers, like all educators, have the critical job of teaching students *how to think*, not *what to think*.** As such, they must handle controversial issues with professional neutrality so as to ensure that they are not putting their thumb on the scale and unduly influencing students. Teachers may engage in age-appropriate ways with complex, even controversial or difficult subjects with their students. But if they are engaging in these subjects, they are required to ensure students are exposed in meaningful ways to multiple perspectives and sources.
9. SDP teachers may not use instructional time or school resources, including computers, supplies, and/or access to family contact information, for personal or political purposes.

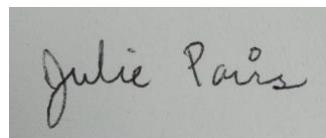
We respectfully urge you to investigate and respond to the multiple likely violations of district rules and policies. We restate our request for the District to issue clear guidance that reminds its educators that, while they retain robust rights as private citizens, their speech and conduct are subject to a number of important limitations set by federal, state, city, and District rules.

⁷ <https://navik12tracker.substack.com/p/philly-teachers-involve-school-students?r=4fx52x>.

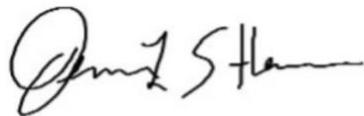
⁸ SDP Policy 316 ("Staff Use of Social Media and Electronic Communications" *available at* https://www.philasd.org/schoolboard/wp-content/uploads/sites/892/2018/02/316_Staff-Use-of-Social-Media-and-Electronic-Communication_Policy_Oct.pdf).

⁹ *Id.* (Guidelines #1)

We welcome the opportunity to speak about these issues further with members of your team, and thank you for your ongoing attention and care to the wellbeing and safety of all members of the SDP community.



Julie Paris
Regional Director
StandWithUs Mid-
Atlantic



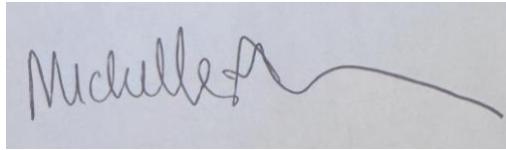
Jenna Statfeld Harris
Senior Counsel
StandWithUs Saidoff Law



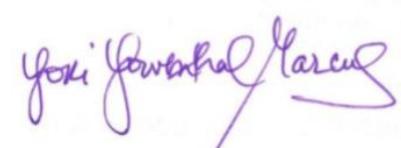
Dana Stangel-Plowe
Chief Program Officer
North American Values Institute
(NAVI)



Gerard Filitti
Senior Counsel
The Lawfare
Project



Michelle Ahdoot
Director of Programming and
Strategy
End Jew Hatred



Lori Lowenthal Marcus
Legal Director
The Deborah Project



Rabbi Dr. Mark
Goldfeder
CEO and Director
National Jewish
Advocacy Center