

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

November XX, 2023

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

The Honorable Miguel Cardona
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear President Biden and Secretary Cardona,

Thank you for your ongoing work to support our nation's young people, including the recent [Dear Colleague letter](#) issued by the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR) reminding schools of their legal responsibilities to provide all students a learning environment free from discrimination. Many of our students, families, and educators are experiencing immeasurable grief and trauma as we witness the horrific violence continue to escalate in Israel and Palestine. I write to urge you to take additional steps to support school communities as they navigate the current political moment.

While we work towards an end to this tragic violence abroad, we must also be clear-eyed about the impacts of such conflict on all of us – and especially our young people – here at home. The pain felt by our Israeli, Palestinian, Jewish, and Muslim communities is indelible, and has been exacerbated by rising hate, antisemitism, and Islamophobia across the United States.

At a time when so many among us, across lines of difference, feel unsafe, it is imperative that our schools be a safe haven for all students and families. It is also critical to the health of our democracy that schools provide environments for students to learn the civic dispositions and skills to navigate hard moments such as this one in healthy, productive, and human-centered ways. Many educators and schools are working hard to create safe spaces for students to learn about the war, provide socio-emotional support to impacted students, help students learn to sift through misinformation in real time, and more.¹ However, we are also witnessing a rise in antisemitic and Islamophobic incidents involving hate, harassment, and threats on school campuses, as well as troubling reports of doxxing, surveillance, and other forms of retaliation or backlash against students expressing diverse and legitimate political perspectives.² Such incidents cause deep fear in school communities, harm students' access to high quality and inclusive learning environments, and limit their ability to express thoughtful and informed points of view.

As we see now and have seen throughout history, schools must strike a difficult balance in times of tense and hostile public discourse. They must protect marginalized groups and their rights to free speech, expression and protest; push back on all forms of hate; and create spaces for humanity and deeper

¹ EducationWeek. "Students Are Bringing Up the Israel-Hamas War in Class. Here's How Teachers Are Responding." October 30, 2023.

<https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/students-are-bringing-up-the-israel-hamas-war-in-class-heres-how-teachers-are-responding/2023/10>

²The New York Times. "Public Schools Struggle to Say the Right Thing About the Israel-Hamas War." October 25, 2023.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/25/nyregion/public-schools-israel-war-hamas-gaza.html>

understanding to flourish. Further complicating the task at hand, many people in positions of authority and power – including Members of Congress – are currently responding to incidents in higher education and K-12 settings with punitive rhetoric, aimed particularly at students defending Palestinian rights and calling out human rights abuses, that raises the temperature and puts further pressure on school leaders. Professional educators have expertise that most politicians simply do not have, and are better able to do their jobs well and cultivate environments of safety and healing for their diverse students when they receive necessary support and thoughtful guidance from our government. I greatly appreciate the emphasis in OCR’s recent Dear Colleague letter to schools on their obligation to ensure all students are protected from discrimination, including harassment, and I urge additional measures to support schools to meet that obligation and support diverse students holistically while also protecting civil liberties. We need a strong voice from our nation’s education leaders that does not succumb to partisan pandering and instead meaningfully supports schools as they work to create safe spaces for all students. I ask that the Department of Education provide additional guidance and support for K-12 schools and institutions of higher education in the context of the ongoing war in Israel and Palestine, including resources and best practices aligned to the following aims:

- Providing the necessary mental health support for students, educators, and support staff, especially those who identify as Israeli, Palestinian, Jewish, and Muslim, to process the trauma of the current situation and receive necessary trauma-informed care;
- Implementing high quality educator and staff training on antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of hatred, including how to foster safe, inclusive environments for all students and prevent and respond to incidents of bullying and hate related to student identities;
- Supporting student and staff social-emotional health and facilitating healthy, safe interactions between diverse students, student groups, and educators to promote deeper understanding grounded in empathy and humanity;
- Preventing and protecting all students, educators, and support staff from instances of hate, bigotry, discrimination, and violence;
- Creating high quality, safe learning opportunities for students to develop important skills for analyzing complex current events, contextualizing such events in history, and evaluating America’s role in the world;
- Helping students and staff use high quality sources to parse out fact from fiction amidst evolving news coverage and misinformation online;
- Promoting opportunities for all students to develop cultural competence and to listen and learn from the experiences and perspectives of those with diverse identities, backgrounds, and viewpoints;
- Promoting restorative rather than punitive responses to conflict on school campuses; and
- Protecting and upholding students’ civil rights and liberties, including equal access to an education free from discrimination and freedom of speech, expression, and protest.

In this moment of deep collective pain, we must remember that schools can be our greatest source of healing. We cannot allow our schools to become casualties of conflict. Rather we must provide them the support, resources, and guidance to fulfill their highest potential and facilitate healing, humanity, and mutual understanding.

Sincerely,

Jamaal Bowman, Ed.D.
Member of Congress

Cc: Catherine Llahmon, Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, Department of Education

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