

Canadian Women Against Antisemitism

As Canadian Women Against Antisemitism¹ (CWAA) we deplore all forms of racism and discrimination. We believe that all people in Canada deserve to live freely and celebrate all areas of our intersectional identities. We value belonging, inclusion, diversity and a safe identity-affirming environment for all. Federally, this principle must be reflected in the Anti-Racism Strategy put forth by the Ministry of Equity, Inclusion and Peoples with Disabilities under the Department of Heritage Canada.

We are especially adamant that these principles be safeguarded for all school-aged children and while we are well aware that education is a provincial responsibility, resources, policies and priorities championed by the federal government have a strong impact on the provinces and territories.

We want to emphasize that we recognize the importance of combating Islamophobia and discrimination against Palestinians and all communities, and we appreciate and support nationality, ethnicity and religion as protected classes. However, to name and favour one single national entity over all others, undermines the very purpose of equity, diversity and inclusion, and rather fosters exclusion, divisiveness and supremacy. Therefore, we are deeply concerned with the growing discussion on “Anti-Palestinian Racism” (APR) as a separate category and implore the Canadian government to omit this concept in its strategy.

According to the Toronto District School Board’s (TDSB) BELONG pillar in its Multi-Year Strategic Plan “All students belong, are engaged, and valued in an inclusive environment.”² This is accomplished by “Establishing inclusive and welcoming learning environments in which every student feels valued and feels a sense of joy, engagement, and belonging.”³ This becomes increasingly difficult when the school board establishes a de facto hierarchy of identities by providing more focus and additional resources to a particular group when their own statistical evidence does not reflect the need for such a clear bias. Such was the case with the June 19th ratification of the TDSB’s Combating Hate and Racism: Student Learning Strategy Update, 2024, where APR was included “In response to student and community voices...”⁴ rather than by statistical and evidence-based critical decision-making. One might suggest that the TDSB has been influenced by external factors and that rather than maintaining their objectivity and their commitment to ALL students, they have become an activist entity on behalf of a segment of the student population at the expense of another.

This became increasingly evident when a TDSB trustee, after a loud, and public outcry from Jewish student, parent and community voices, introduced a motion to include “Anti-Israeli Racism”, in an attempt to create a balance in the board’s anti-racism strategy. The motion failed to gain a majority and was defeated, even though, according to the TDSB’s own data, antisemitic incidents went up by 300 percent last year. Therefore, this indicates a clear bias on the part of the TDSB Board of Trustees.

It is our opinion that neither of these strategies are appropriate for inclusion in any anti-racism strategy, as neither of them constitute racism but may be considered a form of national/ethnic discrimination, which is already a protected class. It is vital that the national/ethnic class remain a general, umbrella category for the obvious danger that it can rapidly polarize and politicize a space that must remain inclusive. Otherwise, one might argue that there ought to be a specific strategy for anti-

Russian, Ukrainian, Uyghur, Kurd, South African, Swazi, Zimbabwean, Congolese, Sudanese and so forth- racism.

Our particular concern with respect to incorporating APR is the ways in which it is defined, often utilizing the Arab-Canadian Lawyers Association (ACLA) definition; and how it is applied, as the definition is antithetical to key aspects of Jewish identity and expression. In particular, recognizing the creation of the modern State of Israel, the indigenous homeland of the Jewish people. It could also limit the ability of all individuals to identify and justly criticize antisemitic language, behaviour and actions.⁵ Formalizing APR in the federal school board strategy may thereby threaten the safety of Jewish students, teachers and parents.

According to established definitions of APR, arguing against the accuracy of the map of Israel in the book "Baba, What Does My Name Mean," or "Amazing Women of the Middle East" which are both available in the TDSB library, would be considered APR. It should be noted that none of these 25 amazing women are Jewish nor Israeli.



The ramifications of this policy are already being felt by Jewish students. Yesterday, one day after the ratification of the TDSB anti-racism report, the following incident occurred at a TDSB school, where a class was conducting a model UN.⁶ The focus of the assignment was on trade. Many of the students used their assigned country's platform to advocate for issues, such as climate change. One student used their platform to focus on foreign policy and advocate for the rights of Palestinian and Israeli civilians in the face of Hamas terrorism⁷. Initially, and in the run up to the presentation, the teacher did not want to let the student speak at all. However, as the student is both Jewish and Israeli, they explained to the teacher that this was a very important topic to them, that they would ensure that the research on their assigned country would be complete and that since other students were using the platform to advocate for their issues, they should be afforded the same opportunity.

On the day of the presentation, the teacher remained adamant that the student not be allowed to present. The student was able to galvanize support from their fellow students and the teacher finally acquiesced. However, the student was censured by the teacher, who did not allow the resolution to be put forward to the model UN for voting.

It is our fear that the polarization and politicization of the Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression space, with the unilateral addition of APR, is going to silence and censor legitimate debate and discussion in classrooms at the middle and high school levels. At the same time, this policy is likely to target Jewish and Israeli students for censorship and censure when endeavouring to belong, advocate for and affirm their identities.

Recommendations:

Keep unilateral political activism out of Anti-Racism strategies and remove APR as a separate category of discrimination.

Review current policies with respect to EDI strategies that incorporate Islamophobia, antisemitism and other forms of discrimination in terms of effectiveness and adequacy in supporting all residents of Canada. Create or refine policies through evidence-based study and data-led critical decision-making. Review all materials used to educate children on EDI for informational accuracy, including appropriate definitions of key terms, benefits to students vs. harms and geopolitical and cultural neutrality.

¹ The document was authored by Talia Klein Leighton and Rachel Zand, members of CWAA. CWAA is a member of the Alliance Combating Campus Antisemitism (ALCCA)

² <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Leadership/Boardroom/Multi-Year-Strategic-Plan/Belong>

³ *ibid*

⁴ Toronto District School Board, Combating Hate and Racism: Student Learning Strategy Update, 2024, Agenda Page 290.

⁵ Arab-Canadian Lawyers Association, "Anti-Palestinian Racism: Naming, Framing and Manifestations," April 2022, p. 14

⁶ While we support the Ministry of Education in keeping politics out of the classroom, a model UN would be the most appropriate time and place to discuss world politics.

⁷ From the student's presentation: "You can be pro-Israel and pro-Gaza, just not pro-Hamas."