



# Jewish Faculty Network

March 31, 2025

Dear Trustees Alexis Dawson, Debbie King, Deborah Williams and TDSB Director Clayton Latouche,

We write as the Jewish Faculty Network, an organization made up of over 200 faculty members and librarians at universities and colleges across Canada, deeply troubled by a recent Toronto District School Board (TDSB) decision to receive the report “Affirming Jewish Identity and Addressing Anti-Semitism Strategy” on February 13, 2025.

As one of the organizations purportedly consulted in the preparation of the report, we find it wholly inadequate. We were invited to participate, among other Jewish organizations in Toronto, in what we believed to be a good faith consultation on April 12th, 2024. The consultation was led by Debbie Donsky, Roni Felson (Superintendents) and Carlo Cabrero (school principal) regarding the experiences and concerns of a significant part of the Jewish community; those whose Jewishness is bound to a long tradition of social justice, including criticism of Israel. We stressed that significant scholarly research indicates that there can be no conflation of the state of Israel, and of the political ideology of Zionism, with Jewish identity, religion or culture. Such scholarship is consistent with the Ontario Human Rights Code, which cites the 1997 Jazairi v. Ontario case to clarify that “a person’s views on the Israel-Palestine conflict were not a creed under the Code, but rather a political opinion on a single issue” and, that “no tribunal or court has found a political opinion or belief to be a creed under Ontario’s Code”. We emphasized the importance of recognizing the diversity of Jewish opinion among educators, parents and students served by the TDSB. We shared our concern about the lack of serious learning and comprehension regarding the history of the Jewish tradition of solidarity across different liberation movements, and particularly the danger of weaponizing false charges of “antisemitism” against our Palestinian friends and allies in the TDSB.

However, we now understand that there was no serious engagement with this process of consultation on behalf of the Board. We were not invited to view or comment on any drafts of the report that followed prior to publication, even to indicate disagreement or critique. Our contributions were largely ignored by the TDSB; despite the report’s nod to diversity within the Jewish community, the elements of the report we refer to in this letter contradict that acknowledgement. Indeed, the TDSB decision to receive the report sets a dangerous precedent in Toronto, the province, and across the country, especially with respect to the conflation of antizionism with antisemitism. Given the direct, current attacks on freedom of speech in the United States, one must be particularly vigilant to ensure that institutional policies do not reproduce antisemitism, especially when they are in principle developed to combat them.

It is clear, from the report’s failures to discuss neo-nazi movements, swastika graffiti, and far right white supremacy, that the consultation undertaken was incomplete and indeed superficial. These are real and present dangers in North America and globally, and they find fertile ground when support for Israel’s state actions, especially against Palestinian human rights, are allowed to masquerade as concern for antisemitism. Indeed, concerns that Zionism is providing a fig leaf for right wing antisemitic movements around the globe has recently prompted divisions even within pro-Israel organizations. In such an environment, it is chilling to see the conflation of anti-Zionism and antisemitism guiding recommendations in the report, and to hear Trustees themselves that received the report slander our



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concerns as examples of antisemitism, exemplifying the very weaponization of term we have decried as making us all less safe.

The repeated references to Israel and Zionism in the report—without any acknowledgment that the Ontario Human Rights Code explicitly notes that positions on place of origin are political and distinct from questions of creed—indicate that the input of critical Zionist, non-Zionist and anti-Zionist voices was not taken seriously. In fact, some of the syntax in the report may be interpreted as explicitly equating anti-Zionism, intersectionality and Jewish identity diversity with antisemitism (see recommendation 6 which reads “Provide professional learning for staff to deepen understanding of antisemitism, including modern manifestations such as anti-Zionism, intersectionality, and Jewish identity diversity.”) While we are willing to assume this implication is the result of poor sentence structure, such grammatical weakness only underline that the report requires further work and should not have been received by the Board on February 13th. Instead, the report goes on to problematically conflate anti-Zionism and antisemitism, harming anti-Zionist and non-Zionist Jewish students and staff by implicitly denying their membership in the Jewish community. This further buttresses a problematic approach that means the only TDSB resources on antisemitism are those that perpetuate this exclusion and harm. This also directly harms many other equity-deserving groups, including Palestinians and those who stand in solidarity with them, from many backgrounds - within the Arab and Muslim communities of the city and beyond.

What makes Toronto schools beautiful and strong is their diversity, and that should include political diversity. The campaign to conflate antisemitism with anti-Zionism seeks to wipe out a deep and rich tradition within Judaism, to erase it from existence. This is a logic we should all fear. We recognize that some Jewish groups are deliberately marginalizing those voices with whom they disagree, in an effort to minoritize diverse opinions. Challenging such a pattern is why diversity, equity, and inclusion policies were introduced in the first place.

Zionism, as a political ideology that emerged in the 19th century, generated controversy within the Jewish community from its inception. While the idea that European Jews should be transferred to Palestine became popular among Christian Zionists and a minority of Jews, in general Jewish people sought equality in the lands where they lived. The results of the Nazi Holocaust buttressed the movement of expulsion and exile especially as Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazis were rejected from locations such as the US and Canada, furthering Jewish settlement in Palestine. But even then, Jewish commentators and scholars were aware that the resulting displacement of Palestinians was a moral failure that would have disastrous consequences for both Palestinians and Jews, a warning that history has tragically confirmed.

Many Jewish people have never been Zionists, and others (including Israeli Jewish people) have become anti-Zionist through disillusionment with the process and consequences of creating an ethnostate. There is nothing about Judaism that requires one be Zionist, and as the existence of a large and powerful Christian Zionist movement attests, there is nothing inherently Jewish about Zionism.

Our organization was formed explicitly to voice opposition to the implementation of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Working Definition of Antisemitism (IHRA-WDA) because it is used to further the dangerous conflation of criticism of Israel with antisemitism. We find the invocation of the IHRA by those endorsing this report very troubling, especially when the TDSB has had no deliberation on



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this, or any, specific definition of antisemitism. Furthermore, the IHRA working definition has been thoroughly discredited by Jewish scholars, denounced by one of its creators, and rejected by major organizations and unions across this country.

We hope that our input above will make it clear that the report must be amended to acknowledge and integrate our concerns.

Kind regards,

The National Steering Committee of the Jewish Faculty Network