

U.S. school district pulls Palestine course after Zionist backlash



Chicago, July 11 (RHC)-- A U.S. school was forced to drop a "Teaching Palestine" training course after pressure from the largely Jewish-populated Skokie district's officials who said the content of the material was "one-sided" calling it "anti-Semitic" propaganda. Skokie is a suburb of Chicago, Illinois.

"[W]e must recognize and accept our role as either confronting the social, political, and educational inequities within U.S. school settings, or continuing to reproduce the oppressions in our current society," the group's website says. "We stand for confronting these inequities. Neutrality is not possible. We understand that teaching is a political act," course designer Teachers for Social Justice's website countered.

The course was designed to cover the "Israeli occupation of Palestine and the Palestine liberation struggle," according to the Jewish News Syndicate citing the educational material's description.

"We were hearing from teachers and also from students that they didn't feel Palestine was being actively covered in the curriculum," according to Lesley Williams, an activist with Chicago's chapter of Jewish Voice for Peace. "It's not as though the existence of these human rights abuses or the existence of the occupation is purely a partisan issue. These are facts that can't be denied."

The school district previously sent out an email to staff, on May 22, regarding training opportunities "related to racial equality and social justice" before backtracking on the "Teaching Palestine" course, which was designed for "critical educators who want to teach about Palestine and the Palestine liberation struggle," according to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency citing information detailed in the email.

The officials buckled under pressure after synagogues and national organizations protested. "We recognize that without multiple perspectives surrounding this topic, we created a sense of exclusion by including this offering. We should have noted this before including the course and apologize for this mistake. Therefore, we are retracting the course," the joint release noted," Dr. Steven Isoye, superintendent; La Wanna Wells, director of equity; and Jim Szczepaniak, director of community relations and strategic partnerships, wrote in a joint statement.

The e-mail sent out by the district had said the "Teaching Palestine" course would draw connections between the issues being faced by Palestinians and race relations in the country.

The material had content specific to "curriculum connections between Palestine and issues affecting our students, such as: state-police violence, the struggle for racial justice in the U.S., settler colonialism in Palestine and the U.S., access to education for historically marginalized youth."

The release from the district officials also said that they will "develop a more rigorous set of standards to determine what professional development opportunities we share with our staff in the future."

However, teachers said the some 2,000 students speak approximately 100 languages, includes a large Jewish population, and exist harmoniously without conflict.

"It's a school that has everyone — Jews, Muslims, every denomination of Christian you can imagine," Aaron Minkus, a history teacher, said. "It's a rainbow, it's the United Nations, and the Arab-Israeli conflict, I'll be honest, never reared its ugly head."

The now-stalled course aimed to "Develop a deeper understanding of the history and current political context of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the Palestine liberation struggle" and "Discuss concrete strategies for how to respond to Zionist Professional Developments and curricula or when parents/staff/others object to anti-Zionist curriculum."

The website of Teachers for Social Justice says teaching as inherently political and, as such, is also offering summer courses on racial justice in the United States as well as "U.S. Imperialism's Impact on Honduras.

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