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October 20, 2022

Hon. Rachna Sizemore Heizer
and Members of the Fairfax County School Board
Gatehouse Administration Center
8115 Gatehouse Road
Falls Church, VA 22042

Dear Chairwoman Heizer and Fellow School Board Members:

We write today regarding the Truthful Education resolution to be considered at tonight's School Board meeting. The JCRC cannot support this resolution as originally drafted, despite our deep dedication to combating racism. We could only support the resolution if it were revised to be more inclusive of the full diversity of identities, beliefs, and narratives of all FCPS students, including those who are Jewish. We greatly appreciate the responsiveness of several Board members to the JCRC's concerns regarding the initial draft, and their efforts to ensure that those concerns be prioritized in revisions that we understand have been under discussion.

We also would support passage of a narrower document, the Resolution of Support for Teachers and Administrators Regarding Inclusive Curriculum and Instruction. Both resolutions, which are non-binding expressions of sentiment, ratify our educators' critical work, and their right to conduct this work without fear of threats or other negative repercussions. We understand that the more limited proposal offers several advantages over even a revised version of the original resolution, in that it avoids some of the concerns regarding process that have been raised and does not incorporate language that can often be divisive and/or poorly understood.

Discussion of Truthful Education Resolution

The JCRC appreciates and supports the important principles that motivated the introduction of this resolution at this time. Our agency and its member synagogues and Jewish institutions across Northern Virginia have been deeply engaged in antiracism work for several years, both independently and in interfaith coalitions. An essential component of the national reckoning on race is the need to address baked-in biases in our school curricula, which are largely devoid of diverse narratives and perspectives. And unfortunately, the divisive, coarsened public discourse that we are now witnessing in the public education sphere has resulted in escalating attacks, both verbal and otherwise, on public servants, triggering understandable fears among educators tasked with this work.

While we understand how and why some members of our Jewish community termed the original resolution antisemitic, we do not concur with that assessment, because it applies a broad, oversimplified characterization to a complicated public policy matter that demands thoughtful, nuanced deliberation and action. However, it is also undeniably true that many of the specific objections raised by Jews do have credibility and merit and are based on negative experiences stemming from the introduction of antiracist curricula nationwide and in our own school district.

Even as our educators strive to correct inaccurate and outdated curricula that ignore the voices and narratives of minority groups, there have already been instances when newly introduced antiracist curricula presented students with an overly simplified view of world history as a struggle between oppressors and oppressed and between white colonialists/white supremacists and all other people. In this framework, Jews who present as white and/or are Zionist (which constitutes over 80% of American Jewry), see their narratives, history and experiences erased, and their children afraid to self-identify as Jews and as individuals who feel an abiding connection to our ancestral homeland in Israel. This outcome directly contradicts the goal of ending the erasure of minority voices. We have witnessed this here in our own school district. Last year an FCPS elementary school posted materials from an organization called Woke Kindergarten that was blatantly anti-Israel, and only removed the content when parents complained. Jewish FCPS students have been subjected to classroom discussions that target Israel and its American Jewish supporters (“the Jewish lobby”) as nefarious oppressors.

The JCRC rejects a false binary that would force Jews to choose between combating antisemitism and combating racism. Make no mistake, there is an alarming crisis of rising antisemitism in this country and worldwide. This week has seen yet another disturbing antisemitic graffiti incident, this time at Robinson Secondary School, that invoked the now infamous tag line, “Jews will not replace us.” But we cannot reject or oppose every effort to combat racism in the misguided assumption that such efforts will inevitably lead to antisemitism. We cannot turn a blind eye to the persistent systemic biases that continue to disadvantage Black and Brown children. And we cannot dismiss the deep alliances between Blacks and Jews that have resulted in powerful social change over decades and generations. We must combat antisemitism and simultaneously combat racism and every other form of hatred and bias, not only because doing so is right and just, but because all these struggles are intertwined and depend on one another to achieve the ultimate goal of fostering schools where all children are safe and valued.

Dr. Martin Luther King famously preached, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” These words are as true today as they were over fifty years ago. The JCRC is committed to being an authentic ally in the struggle against racism and all forms of hate -- just as we hope to have allies in our urgent efforts to combat accelerating antisemitism in our midst.

Issues of race, antisemitism, hatred, equity, and justice demand more than rigid thinking and facile “yes or no” responses from all parties involved. They will not be resolved through one non-binding Board resolution, but rather require constant examination and effort. We look forward to continuing

to dialogue with the Board, Dr. Reid and other FCPS administrators and educators to increase understanding of and sensitivity to these difficult challenges.

Sincerely,

Guila Franklin Siegel
Associate Director

Vicki Fishman
Director, Northern Virginia Government and
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cc: Dr. Michelle Reid
Dr. Nardos King
Ron Halber