

School board admits mistake using 'Free Palestine' as example of violence in dress code

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London

The Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB) is facing criticism for using the slogan "Free Palestine" as an example of a label on clothing that could incite violence.

Social Sharing

Advocates from London's Palestinian community say they were hurt to see the slogan in new guidelines

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The Thames Valley Education Centre is under fire from the community for a controversial guideline on its new dress code policy. (Dave Chidley/CBC)

The Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB) is facing criticism for using the slogan "Free Palestine" as an example of a label on clothing that could incite violence.

The example appeared in guidelines outlining the new dress code for students. It sparked complaints from community groups and was quietly removed. But there's still a call for southwestern Ontario's largest school board to publicly apologize.

"This thing that happened at the TVDSB is sadly a perfect example of the type of racism that Palestinians face day in and day out here in Canada," said Thomas Woodley, president of Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME).

"We have a number of contacts in London and even some educators who work in the TVDSB, they brought it to our attention and we're very concerned, very hurt, and offended by it."

Section 8 of the TVDSB dress code FAQ section before it was taken down. The board describes a 'Free Palestine' t-shirt as an example of a political slogan that promotes or incites violence. (Submitted by Thomas Woodley)

In a statement, the board said it acknowledges that using a slogan such as "Free Palestine" was inappropriate and shouldn't have been used, adding that they "sincerely apologize for the harm this has caused the community and all impacted parties."

"The usage of 'Free Palestine' as an example in a supplementary FAQ resource does not reflect the intent of the Guidelines, nor is it reflective of Thames Valley's values and vision to be a learning community that inspires innovation, embraces diversity and celebrates achievement," the statement said.

In the frequently asked questions (FAQ) section of the new dress code, published last week, the board used a 'Free-Palestine' t-shirt as an example of a "divisive political slogan on clothing or headwear considered to 'promote or incite violence'."

The previous dress code varied from school to school in the TVDSB, so the board drafted a system-wide dress code focusing less on policing students' self-expression and personal choice, and more on equity and inclusion.

New dress code for TVDSB schools to focus on personal expression, anti-oppression

Acknowledging the gravity of the incident, TVDSB's director of education, Mark Fisher met with Hikma Public Affairs Council, an advocacy group for London's Muslim community, and representatives of the National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM) to discuss reparations.

"Director Fisher committed to an investigation to find out who did it. The board is committing to review its process for supplemental resources to ensure the materials are done with an anti-discrimination lens," The Canadian Palestinian Social Association of London (CPSA) said in a Nov. 11 Facebook post.

Nehal AL Tarhuni, the group's president said she couldn't believe that something like this was posted, adding that it spread like wildfire within the Palestinian community demanding action.

"It galvanized the community pretty quickly because it was quite a shock to see this type of material posted by a board that hosts a lot of students and teachers from Palestinian backgrounds," she said.

Calls for anti-Palestine racism education

Nehal AL Tarhuni is president of The Canadian Palestinian Social Association in London. (CPSA website)

AL Tarhuni says she's glad to see that the board was receptive to community feedback, and immediately took the example down, but more concrete action is needed, she said.

"We would like to see them furthering the discussion so that both the teachers and student body is aware what the word 'free-Palestine' means and why this was an issue in the first place.

Woodley wonders why out of all examples the board could've used, this was the one they chose.

"It would've been better off to just not provide any example and I'm peaked as to where exactly this came from or who suggested it?" he said. "If you're Palestinian and working for a school system, and you hear that your board is using this as something that's hate or violence, think of how hurtful that would be."

Woodley's calling on TVDSB to include anti-Palestinian racism as part of its Equity and Inclusive Education policy.

"This is something that needs to be discussed, I think the best way to deal with racism is not to cover it up or discuss it in the back rooms, but to talk about it publicly," he said.

Both AL Tarhuni and Woodley are encouraged by TVDSB's commitment to learn about the cultural sensitivity around the conflict, and do better. CPSA will meet with board officials on Wednesday to talk next steps.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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