

June 19, 2025

Pino Buffone
Director of Education
Ottawa-Carleton District School Board
133 Greenbank Road, Nepean, Ottawa, Ontario K2H 6L3

Re: Retaliation Against Valedictorian for Pro-Palestinian Graduation Remarks

Dear Mr. Pino Buffone,

I am writing on behalf of the Anti-Racism Program of the CJPME Foundation to raise grave concerns about the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board's response to valedictorian Elizabeth Yao's graduation speech at Bell High School on 12 June 2025. In a single sentence near the close of her remarks, Ms. Yao [stated](#):

“As part of our commitment to truth and reconciliation, we must also name the colonial and genocidal atrocities unfolding in Gaza, where more than 17,000 Palestinian children have been killed.”

Minutes after the ceremony, Ms. Yao was informed by her principal that her words had “caused harm,” and she was instructed not to return to campus the following Monday—a de facto suspension, despite the board's public [claim](#) that “no students were suspended as a result of the speech.”

1. Violation of OCDSB's Own Guidelines

The OCDSB's Expression of Identity and Global Conflicts resource explicitly [states](#) that “slogans or symbols that signal solidarity, such as ‘Free Palestine,’ are permitted so long as they don't violate the Code of Conduct.” Ms. Yao's brief acknowledgement of Palestinian suffering plainly falls within the permitted scope of student expression. By punishing her, the school has contradicted board policy and chilled lawful speech.

2. Anti-Palestinian Racism and Educational Harm

Labelling Ms. Yao's remarks as “harmful” while ignoring the documented suffering of Palestinians exemplifies anti-Palestinian racism—the denial or suppression of Palestinian identity, narrative, and rights. Such erasure isolates Arab and Muslim

students, breeds mistrust in school authorities, and undermines the OCDSB's human-rights obligations outlined in [Policy P.147.GOV](#).

3. Misapplication of Discipline

Informally barring a student from school without due process contravenes the Ontario Education Act and the OCDSB Code of Conduct, which require transparency, documentation, and the least-restrictive measures—especially for speech that is expressly protected. The board's current stance therefore exposes it to legal and reputational risk.

4. Demands for Immediate Redress

In light of these concerns, we call on the OCDSB to:

1. Rescind all informal or formal disciplinary actions taken against Elizabeth Yao and confirm in writing that no notation will appear on her Ontario Student Record.
2. Issue a public apology to Ms. Yao, her classmates, and the wider Palestinian community for this act of silencing.
3. Affirm, in clear terms, students' right to express solidarity with Palestine as articulated in board policy, and communicate this affirmation to all administrators before year-end.
4. Implement mandatory anti-racism and anti-oppression training for principals and staff, with a dedicated module on anti-Palestinian racism developed in consultation with affected communities.

Education should cultivate critical thinking and moral courage, not penalize it. By penalizing Ms. Yao for a statement consistent with international human-rights norms and the board's own values, the OCDSB risks betraying its commitment to equity and inclusion.

We urge you to correct this injustice swiftly and transparently.

Sincerely,

Jamila Ewais
Lead Researcher of the Anti-Racism Program
CJPME Foundation