

**Statement of Karla Silvestre  
President, Montgomery County Board of Education**

**Committee on Education and the Workforce; Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Postsecondary Education Hearing, May 8, 2024**

Chairman Bean, Ranking Member Bonamici, Members of the Subcommittee, good morning. My name is Karla Silvestre, and I am the President of the Board of Education for Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today about our efforts to address antisemitism in our school system.

Let me begin by assuring the Committee that the Board of Education I lead is committed to combating antisemitism, hate speech, and racism wherever and whenever we see it.

I can't tell you we've gotten it right every single time. But as a Board, we are committed to working with our administrators and our community to constantly improve our processes and outcomes.

Montgomery County Public Schools is the 15th-largest school district in the country, with over 160,000 students and nearly 25,000 employees. We are one of the most diverse school districts in the nation. Our families and students come from every major religion and ethnicity, and speak over 162 languages at home. More than a third of county residents are foreign born.

In Montgomery County, we have an elected, part-time Board with a governance and oversight role. The Board sets the standard for achievement and accountability. Our core mission is education. This is the lens through which we approach our relationships with students, employees, and our community. This is the perspective I bring to today's hearing.

I also bring the perspective of my history. When I was just eight, I came to this country to escape the violence stemming from Guatemala's civil war. I became a proud U.S. citizen in 2007 and went on to be elected to the Board of Education by the citizens of Montgomery County.

I am also the parent of children in the school system, and incidents of antisemitism and hate-based language are extremely important to me.

With that in mind, I know the Committee is aware of recent press reports and public complaints about antisemitic imagery, language, and vandalism in our district.

Let me be clear: We do not shy away from imposing consequences for hate-based behavior, including antisemitism. Our policy is to initiate an investigation each time the school system receives a complaint or we witness particular antisemitic, hate-filled, or racist language or actions.

There is a range of consequences for teachers and staff, and if our rigorous investigation finds that a staff member cannot uphold the Employee Code of Conduct and support a safe learning environment for all students, they will not remain in Montgomery County Public Schools. Student discipline follows the Student Code of Conduct and Student Rights and Responsibilities.

We are taking affirmative steps to address antisemitism and other forms of hate.

First, in the past year, we revised policies and procedures to strengthen our response to antisemitism, hate, and racist behavior.

Second, we have put into place a clear reporting process and training for school leaders and staff. We are empowering students and families to report incidents of bullying and harassment so that we can take action.

Third, through education, we are working to prevent antisemitic incidents from happening in the first place. We have enhanced the curriculum throughout the K-12 experience to expand on topics related to the Jewish experience.

Fourth, we are strengthening relationships and partnerships with our community. We have participated in listening sessions in synagogues. This year, 12 community organizations joined us to form the Hate-Bias Advisory Group to support our collective effort to address hate-based speech and incidents, including antisemitism.

Fifth, starting this summer, we will have mandatory hate-bias training for all staff.

In closing, antisemitism has no place in Montgomery County Public Schools. The suffering caused by antisemitism, hate, and racism interferes with students' learning and well-being. I want to do everything in my power to make sure all students can pursue their education without worrying about antisemitic, racist, or hate-filled threats.

We will continue to evaluate our policies and our actions to ensure all students and families, every single one of them, feel safe, valued, and welcome in our school system.

I welcome the opportunity to continue this important discussion.

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