



April 23, 2025

[SENT VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL]

Dr. Maggie Rodriguez
Principal
Design and Architecture Senior High School
4001 NE 2nd Avenue
Miami, Florida 33137
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Re: Concerns about Potential First Amendment Violations and Other Discriminatory Actions Relating Design and Architecture Senior High School's "Multicultural Day"

Dear Dr. Rodriguez:

I am writing on behalf of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), the United States' largest Arab American civil rights organization. We were founded in 1980 by former U.S. Senator James Abourezk and are based in Washington, D.C. We have received an alarming report about an attempt to censor the expression and speech of one of your Palestinian students during "Multicultural Day" on Thursday, April 17, 2025.

We understand that STUDENT was singled out by a staff member of Design and Architecture Senior High School (DASH) when she came to school wearing a Palestinian keffiyeh. We understand that DASH teacher Laura Varela approached STUDENT while she was getting food as part of the celebration. Ms. Varela publicly berated STUDENT by demanding that she remove her Palestinian keffiyeh claiming it was a political statement, offensive, and was not representative of Palestinian culture because it was from Mesopotamia, not Palestine. When STUDENT stood her ground and refused to remove her keffiyeh, Ms. Varela further berated her by saying that what she was doing was wrong.

STUDENT was very shaken by the incident. She immediately went to the bathroom and cried. She missed the Multicultural Day celebration. Ms. Varela humiliated STUDENT in front of other students and teachers. Some of those students had the courage to report Ms. Varela's actions to DASH counselors.



STUDENT's treatment raises serious First Amendment and Title VI concerns. Palestinian American students have every right to express pride in their culture, including wearing traditional garb such as the keffiyeh. "Students [and] teachers [do not] shed their constitutional rights to freedom of expression at the schoolhouse gate." *Tinker v. Des Moines Indep. Cmty. Sch. Dst.*, 393 U.S. 503,506 (1969). Moreover, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of shared ancestry in federally-funded programs, including schools.

Furthermore, to the extent that such treatment applies to the speech or conduct of Palestinian or Arab students, the school may also be in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause. We wonder, for example, if the same sort of bias would be tolerated against a white student wearing a Ukrainian flag or an Israeli student an Israeli one. The First Amendment does not allow such censorship, and the Fourteenth Amendment does not permit such discriminatory application of rules based on the race or national origin of students.

In her DASH teacher profile, Ms. Varela states "DASH is a very diverse school and a great place to work and learn." Discrimination and censorship are inconsistent with diversity and learning. Diversity presents the opportunity to learn from others and about others. STUDENT presented the DASH community with an opportunity to learn about Palestinian identity and culture. Rather than encourage learning about Palestinians, Ms. Varela sent the message that Palestinian students do not have equal rights. It is precisely that sort of message that contributes to the dangerous rise in racism and violence against Palestinian Americans.

We encourage you to allow your students to express themselves and their cultural identity without censorship and to stand up for their rights, rather than to permit those with a bias to discriminate against them. Such is the nature of an educational institution and is your duty as an educator. We encourage you to provide your staff with training on Palestinian and Arab identity and invite you to contact our office for support.

ADC is happy to meet with DASH to discuss the national context of discrimination against Palestinian and Arab Americans and the nationwide efforts to prevent their full participation in American life. We are watching situations like this closely and are available to be a resource to your school to ensure that no staff, faculty, or student is subjected to unlawful discrimination based on their identity as a Palestinian or Arab, or their political beliefs relating to such identity.