

ADL report on Newton kept private

Group offers no details when releasing findings

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Although the Anti-Defamation League has indicated that it has done a "careful review" of allegations regarding anti-Israel curriculum in the Newton Public Schools, the group has yet to make the details of its review known to the public.

Requests from The Advocate to release the report drew different responses from ADL officials, leaving its status as something of a mystery.

Leaders from ADL, the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) and Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP) released a joint statement Nov. 6 regarding the allegations.

The statement, which was printed by The Advocate as a Letter to the Editor, said that "based on a careful review of the materials at issue by ADL and JCRC, there is substantial reason to believe that the allegations made in the ad are without merit." The advertisement referenced in the statement was taken out in several Boston-based publications in October by the advocacy group Americans for Peace & Tolerance (APT), whose President is Charles Jacobs. It listed a number of texts that the ad claims "demonize Israel and America, while glorifying Islam."

According to the joint statement, the leaders of the Jewish community said, "The [APT] ad misinterprets certain elements of the materials and lacks reasonable context. The Newton School Committee and its leadership have been responsive, and have addressed the questions posed to them in a thoughtful and constructive way."

When reached for comment, Robert Trestan, ADL New England Regional Director and Jeffrey Robbins, the Board Chair of ADL's New England Region, chose not to elaborate further on their statement, discuss or provide copies of exactly what materials they reviewed, identify the questions they posed to the School Committee, or provide a report analyzing their findings.

Trestan only reiterated that "the [APT] ad is misleading. It is taken out of context." While Trestan said a report of their investigation does not exist, Robbins said there is indeed such a written analysis but it is not available to the media. "It's an internal report," he said. "People do this stuff internally all the time. ... It involves all kinds of proprietary research."

JCRC Executive Director Jeremy Burton said the point of the joint statement was only to respond to APT's advertisement. "The letter is very specific to the allegations by [APT]." He added that Jewish community leaders have had "productive" conversations with the

Newton School Committee. "They've been very open," he said, but declined to comment on the questions that were posed to the committee.

In November, APT took out a new ad, which compared a handout of maps depicting Israel given to [Newton](#) students to similar maps featured in a recent MBTA ad that was criticized by the Jewish community.

Robbins added that he has met with School Committee Chair Claire Sokoloff and Vice Chair Matt Hills on multiple occasions. He said he did not ask Sokoloff and Hills whether the handout of the maps was used in the classrooms. He noted that since he himself has not seen the handout and did not have proof that it was given to the students, he did not wish to ask the School Committee about its usage. The controversy regarding the materials has been brewing for the last two years, when a parent complained about a chapter in "The Arab World Studies Notebook" that alleged Palestinian women were killed by "Israeli occupation forces." According to media reports, another parent of a [Newton](#) high school student filed a complaint with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in May of this year, claiming that the history curriculum for 9th- and 10th-graders, which includes historical origins of major world religions, violated the separation of church and state, and focused an excessive amount of time on Islam, while presenting anti-Israel, anti-Semitic, racist, and false information.

According to one of those reports, state officials disagreed with the complaint and found "no violation of education law, regulation or policy" with regard to the curriculum.

APT's November ad cited two sources which are no longer in use: "Flashpoints: Guide to World History," a link on the [Newton North High School](#) library website, which was taken down after it was deemed inappropriate; and "The Arab World Studies Notebook," which was discontinued during the 2011-12 school year. A third, "Islamic History: The Coming of the West," was brought to APT by a parent but it is unclear whether it was ever used.

There were two other sources identified by the ad:

"A Muslim Primer," which may still be in use but according to at least one media report has never been taught in its entirety. Students read one chapter from the book titled "The Status of Women," which compared women's roles in Western and Muslim societies but did not include the citations in the ad.

"A Woman Where Womanhood Reigns Supreme," Mary Wilson's account of her experience working on the BBC2 series "Living Islam." The APT cited quotes that were taken out of context.

Newton Public Schools Superintendent David Fleishman, in an interview with The Advocate, said that the map referenced in the second advertisement was used in the classrooms, but it was part of a packet of 15 to 20 other maps taken from the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), an independent think tank. Fleishman said the point of the exercise was to teach all perspectives, including those of the Palestinian people and how they perceive geographical borders. "It was used to teach how maps are viewed," he added. In addition to the Palestinian perspective, he said, Israel's side has also been included in the curriculum, including the Palestinians' rejections of Israel's peace offers.

"We have excellent teachers and administrators," Fleishman added, who select materials based on state goals. He said that teachers use different materials every year, including

maps. According to "The Overview of **Newton**'s High School Curriculum," Fleishman's written statement, "We give our students ... the opportunity to carefully listen to and debate different perspectives. Our children hear opinions and, especially now in the Internet age, they are exposed to a multitude of viewpoints. As a result, teaching critical thinking is an increasingly important skill. We can present a range of perspectives, including those that are not widely accepted, and challenge students to examine evidence, debate the issues, and articulate their thoughts.

"While much of our material is factual, we also present a range of opinions and perspectives. Our educators work to ensure that students understand when they are receiving a point of view, as opposed to a proven fact."

Steven Stotsky is Senior Research Analyst at the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA), a mediamonitoring organization for promoting accurate and balanced coverage of Israel and the Middle East. He has reviewed various classroom materials used in the Newton Public Schools that were provided to him by parents of the students and concerned **Newton** residents. "Some of the materials had problems," he said, including "[by] not presenting an accurate and complete history of the conflict."

The materials Stotsky reviewed included selected pages from "A Muslim Primer," a timeline of the Arab-Israeli conflict with accompanying teacher discussion points, and pages from textbooks called "Islamic History: The Story of the Conflict," "World History: Human Legacy," and a Time magazine article on Islamophobia from August 2010.

According to Stotsky, those sources included incorrect statements and biased terminology, and omitted important information such as officially sanctioned demonization of Jews that has perpetuated Arab enmity toward the Israeli state. He added that the class notes he reviewed for studentteacher discussions regarding the conflict over land "dismissed the religious component of the conflict as unimportant and downplayed Arab terrorism, while magnifying a single act of Jewish terrorism. It implied that the land belonged to the Palestinians originally and the Jews have taken possession of it."

Stotsky's role was to review and analyze the materials. He did not speak to the school administration directly or get involved with the issue in other ways.

According to Trestan, Robbins and Burton, they have not been successful in reaching out to Jacobs to discuss APT's advertisements. In an interview with The Advocate, Jacobs explained, "I wish we could share our data with them. But sadly our prior experiences show that we cannot trust them with information before we take it public. We would rather share our information directly with the public. History shows – as in the case of Northeastern – that our current strategy is a much more effective way to make positive change."

Jacobs referred to the occurrences of anti-Semitism at **Northeastern University**, which have been documented for the past several years. In a Letter to the Editor in the Nov. 22 issue of The Advocate, Trestan, Robbins, and CJP's Barry Shrage and Robert Small said, "Over the past several years, students and faculty at Northeastern University have raised concerns regarding what they have described as virulent and intimidating

anti-Israelism or even anti-Semitism, on campus. Over the past year, we have worked closely with officials at Northeastern regarding these concerns."

At the time of those occurrences, the New York-based Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) took note of APT's findings and conducted an investigation based on firsthand reports from students and followed up with a letter to Northeastern President Joseph Aoun on July 5. In the letter – written by ZOA National President Morton Klein and Susan Tuchman, director of the ZOA Center for Law and Justice – the organization singled out several professors, including Denis Sullivan and Berna Turam, both from the international affairs department and M. Shaid Alam, an economics professor, who promoted anti-Israeli agenda and mocked Jewish students for their views. ZOA's letter criticized Northeastern administrators for failure to remedy the situation after repeated complaints.

According to the ZOA, ADL has taken credit for the work ZOA and APT has done in putting pressure on Northeastern officials to address anti- Semitism on campus: "The notion that it was the ADL and CJP, and no one else is responsible, is just patently false," said Tuchman.

Jacobs voiced similar sentiments, saying that – just like it is now dismissing the current concerns about the Newton Public Schools – when ZOA and APT first brought up the issues about Northeastern, ADL dismissed their concerns, which ultimately "resulting in the firing, dismissal and/or reassignment of three [Northeastern] staffers, including the radical campus Muslim chaplain."

ADL, which opted to discontinue all advertising in The Jewish Advocate after learning this story was going to press, did not respond when asked for comment about the Northeastern situation.