

Open Letter from White Alums to the Park Community

In recent months, current and former black students in Baltimore's elite private schools have documented their [educational experiences of white supremacy and trauma](#) on social media. Some groups have gone a step further, such as with Park School's Class of 2020 [issuing a series of demands](#) to the current administration, and a collective of recent and distant Black Park alumni [echoing those demands while issuing their own challenge to enact structural change](#). While the class of 2020's initial letter was lauded across the board, the Black at Park Collective's effort was [first celebrated](#), and [then abandoned](#) in the wake of Headmaster Dan Paradis' (backed by a [far right media outlet](#), white parents', alums and [board members'](#)) [claims that the letter included](#) anti-semitic language.

As white alums we feel the need to weigh in on the hollowness of Paradis' accusations and the failure of white Park students, parents and alums to be true allies to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Black at Park's thorough letter and list of resources went unquestioned except for a single line that stated, "The work necessary starts most immediately with an examination of Park's history: its inception, early exclusions, culture of whiteness and wealth hoarding, its tolerance of Zionism, and its parasitic relationship to Baltimore City." Dan Paradis took exception to their word choice, describing "wealth hoarding," "tolerance for Zionism," and "parasitic relationship" in particular as pernicious anti-semitic tropes. **None of the associated citations in the collective's letter nor the specific claims within are even discussed or refuted.** They include:

- [An article exploring the Holocaust analogy](#), how it's weaponized by contemporary anti-semites to obscure the undesirable history of our own country and other colonial powers around the world.
- An article exploring the [parallels between African Americans historical and current experiences in the US with those of the Palestinian people](#).
- [An article attempting to broaden our historical analysis](#) of carcerality and colonialism beyond the European context, including the United States.
- [A conversation discussing the BDS movement](#) and the worldwide narrative battle for legitimacy and moral high ground in the Zionist movement

Instead, the school has chosen to overlook these factually grounded phrases and articles, claiming that they are inherently rooted in anti-semitism. This attack exposes what those in power are most uncomfortable confronting, and therefore what we must double our focus on. Let's seriously consider these claims in an historical context:

"Wealth hoarding" and "parasitic relationship to Baltimore City"

Park School is a private school located in Baltimore County whose tuition ranges from 18k-34k a year, making it completely inaccessible to poor and working class people. Its [origin story](#) starts with an abandonment of the public school system in 1912. Jewish parents chose to leave Baltimore City Public Schools when they were dissatisfied with certain school board appointments rather than fighting for the system's betterment, itself a massive act of privilege not available to the city's Black residents. While Park frames its opening as an act of resistance against persecution due to the barring of Jewish children from local private schools, the school itself enacted identical discriminatory policies, not allowing black students in until 40 years later. Park then relocated from the City to the County, following the [public policy fueled white flight](#) responsible for the deeply segregated Baltimore of today. The school will claim it was simply following the parents of their students to meet them where they're at. Critics will point to the suspicious timing of the move occurring soon after admitting its first

Black student. Regardless of the intentions and rationale behind this move, the impact of leaving was the same: Park would ensure the inequitable structure of society was reproduced generation after generation by hoarding the rich, powerful, and politically connected families into spaces that remained both financially and geographically inaccessible to Black Baltimore.

After all, do we really think if all children had to attend Baltimore City Public Schools, Park's parents would tolerate the decades of underfunding that has led to roach infested, falling apart facilities with no drinkable water, dysfunctional heat in the winter, no AC in the summer, triple the class sizes, and insufficient technology and supplies? The current condition of Baltimore City Public Schools is only acceptable for other people's children, and continues because those with the resources and power to change the City's material conditions have chosen instead to isolate themselves into white bubbles immune from the injustices. Park is [an active participant, not a detached observer in this situation](#), since "every child who leaves public school for private school chips away at public education's legitimacy as an important and necessary institution, and gives conservative lawmakers more ammunition to take money out of the public school system."

A parasite is an organism that derives its nutrients at another's expense. The terminology used here by the Black at Park Organizing Collective is factually grounded in the historical record, while the claim of anti-semitism by Dan Paradis is lobbed without support, and only serves to distract the community from confronting our historical complicity in white supremacy.

Furthermore, Park shields their money from taxes that would serve the public good (as exposed by its own student body's [investigative journalism](#)) by housing their funds in offshore accounts in the Cayman Islands. In addition, the school is a recent recipient of a federal PPP grant, public money not being utilized for public school students but instead utilized for operational private school needs. Park not only hoards its political connections for its own financially and geographically isolated community, it diverts public funds away from the segregated Black Baltimore that it helped to create.

"Tolerance for Zionism"

Zionism is a politically charged term that immediately draws binary battle lines in people's minds. It is worth considering the complexity of what it is and is not. The [dictionary defines Zionism](#) as "a movement for (originally) the re-establishment and (now) the development and protection of a Jewish nation in Historic Palestine." We understand the notion that the Jewish people feel the need for a homeland that they can preserve and protect in order to grow their/our culture and avoid annihilation by powerful forces. **What we do not support** is the creation of this homeland by settlement on land already occupied by other people, ethnically cleansing Palestinians, forcibly removing those people from their homes, refusing their right to return, repeatedly violating international agreements by annexing lands beyond defined borders, compacting them into narrow territories deemed to be [uninhabitable for human beings](#), restricting access to water and enforcing blockades, allowing only 2-4 hours of electricity a day in the Gaza strip, eliminating their ability to trade with other nations, all while continuing to shift their borders in such a way that destroys movement between Palestinian towns and creating an artificial archipelago of Palestinian-controlled land. This with the addition of Deadly Exchange programs between US police forces (including BPD) and Israeli Occupation forces during which they exchange tactics in suppressing protest movements and killing unarmed civilians. For Americans today, even naming Israel as a [settler colonial state](#) (since they settled on land to which Palestinians are indigenous) and acknowledging Palestinians as human beings with the right to non-violent protest is [speech in danger of being criminally outlawed](#). As students at Park, we were never exposed to the full history of the state

of Israel. Even those of us that are Jewish could not safely question the political decisions of Israel's elected leaders without it being interpreted to mean we disagree with the state of Israel and Jewish people existing at all. Anti-Trump Americans are not accused of believing that the United States shouldn't exist because they criticize the current cartoonish occupier of the White House; certainly the same should be true of those who criticize Netanyahu, Trump's even more politically extreme ally. Furthermore, we should not conflate [anti-Zionism](#) with anti-semitism; [they're not the same thing](#).

The Black at Park Organizing Collective could have been more precise with their language, since Zionism isn't just *tolerated* at Park, it's *celebrated* -- and opposing perspectives are shunned by the curriculum and faculty. To clarify, the collective was not arguing that Zionism should not be tolerated. Rather, the introductory clause in that particular sentence called for the institution to *examine* why it tolerates Zionism, a perspective that has very real and alarming connections to anti-blackness, which the rest of their letter and links within demonstrate.

We urge the readers of this letter to go back and read the letter put forth by the Black at Park Organizing Collective in its entirety. It is vital to our dialogue about racism at Park that we not pull apart language out of context solely to shift the public conversation away from what is most important:

- acknowledging Park's role in perpetuating racism and other injustices
- providing an open and safe environment for the school community to critically explore the intersectionality of Zionism, settler colonialism, and anti-Blackness.

Now What?

The true depth of white support of the Black Lives Matter movement can be best measured by our commitment to the movement's [full set of political objectives](#), especially when it's uncomfortable and involves implicating ourselves in injustice and dismantling existing power structures. If you don't support reparations, defunding of police, an end to the drug war and death penalty, then take the BLM sticker off of your car because you don't actually support the movement for black lives.

If you call yourself an anti-racist and then abandon your support of the Black students who've suffered the tangible impacts of racism based on the unsupported claims of powerful white actors, then we declare a gap between your words and your actions. We are saddened that the initial solidarity shown by many white Park parents, alums, board members, staff, leadership, and students was so quickly abandoned without even consulting the authors of the language in question. The full body of work done by the Black at Park Organizing Collective on social media and in the contents of their letter is amazing.

As white alums we stand in solidarity with them, doubling down on all of their demands with a renewed emphasis on the critical exploration of the links between Zionism, settler colonialism, and anti-Blackness. We commit to following their lead, doing what they decide will be most helpful to their efforts even when (and *especially* when) their words and actions cause us discomfort and/or initial disagreement. Furthermore, we condemn Headmaster Dan Paradis' false conflation of anti-zionism with anti-semitism, and his private individual shaming and pressuring of the 2020 class leaders in order to break solidarity with their Black Alumni at Park Collective. He has clearly demonstrated an inability to effectively lead the anti-racism work Park so desperately needs.

We ask that our white and white/Jewish peers in particular do the same, as we are uniquely positioned to shield their work from illegitimate claims of anti-semitism.

Sincerely,

[*use this link to sign](#)

Park Alums & Current Students:

Adam Haganir '05

Alexandra Lazerow '68

Alice Barry '07

Alice Etherton, née Lawrie '12

Ann Hirsch '03

Anna-Rose Schenerman '12

Anna W Brown '04

Anna Connors '19

Annajane Yolken '07

Ben Cohn '19

Benjamin Morrison '03

Benjamin Redgrave '10

Bernard Feinsod '06

Brian D. Katzenberg '03

Cecilia Rice '19

Cici Osias '19

Claire Flowers '12

Claire Sleslinski '04

Claudia Henry '20

Clare Chalkley '16

Cody Tracey '11

Corey Gaber '03

Dan Ryugo '07

Dani Wassel '01

David Flores '03

Drew Rosenthal '09

Eleanor Cody '15

Ellie Maza '20

Emma Kandel-Krieger '10

Emma Reisinger '06

Emma Wulf '10

Emmett Smith '21

Erin Pressman '01

Evan Greenberg '10

Ezra Miller '06

Fiona Brummer '21

Gabriella Reamer '14

Georgi McCauley '10

Hannah Briggs '11

Hannah Himmelrich '12

Hannah Mitchell '10

Harry Casey '03
Isabel Rickman '12
Jack Meyerhoff '04
Jacob Blom '00
Jama Lazerow '69
Jeanette (Wiebush) Holdbrook '06
Jeremy Winer '10
Jonathan Weiss '06
Josephine Verchomin, '12
Josh Lauren '03
Julia Baez '00
Julia Boscov-Ellen '11
Kai Philippe '20
Kelsey Schultz '10
Kira Lanier '04
Kiril Spirovski '03
Laila Phillips '11
Laura Friedman '11
Lauren Leffer '12
Lauren Rubin '06
Leah Greenberg '07
Leah Silverberg '12
Leah Wissow '06
Leanna Gitter '16
Lee Ford '06
Lisa Boscov-Ellen '06
Lisa Warren '99
Liza Casey '06
Maggie Casey '10
Mara James '07
Margaret Rorison '01
Mary Notari '03
Mary (Mollie) Post '19
Matan Zeimer '10
Mattie Rogers '91
Max Struever '07
Maeve Doyle '03
Megan Cohen '03
Michael Berkowitz '03
Michael Levy '06
Michael Tucker '10
Molly Hamilton '00
Molly Wassel '10
Natalie Brown '06
Natalie Rudin '15
Nicole Rogers '17
Noël Sitnick '13
Olivia Bullivant '17

Olivia Chalkley '13
Rachael Devecka '19
Rachel Ehly (Berkowitz) '07
RJ Gitter '12
Robin Frank '88
S Gold '06
Sarah Minihane '12
Sam Donnelly '08
Sara Phillippe '15
Sheridan Merrick '15
Spencer Hickock '03
Susanna Hamilton '97
Tony Eccles '07
Tory Eskenazi '03
Zy Baer '12