

For immediate release

HUNDREDS OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WALK OUT TO PROTEST ANTI-PALESTINIAN RACISM AT THE TORONTO DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

November 15, 2021

Flemingdon Park, Toronto

On November 12, 2021, between 200 and 250 students attending the Marc Garneau Collegiate Institute in the Toronto District School Board walked out of their classrooms at 11 AM and took to the streets outside, waving Palestinian flags and holding signs with strong messages of justice including “FREE FREE PALESTINE!” “FROM THE RIVER TO THE SEA, PALESTINE WILL BE FREE;” “Hey, hey TDSB, Palestine will be free;” “Gaza, Gaza don’t you cry, Palestine will never die!” “Long live Palestine!” “TDSB, we will not be silenced!” “What do we want? JUSTICE! When do we want it?! NOW!” “Justice for JAVIER DAVILA!” “Justice for DESMOND COLE!”

They demonstrated for an hour and a quarter, garnering the approval of drivers who honked in support or parked and joined in. They demand an end to anti-Palestinian racism at the Toronto District School Board in the following ways:

1. Ensure the safety of any Palestinian students and staff who may face backlash, unfair accusations, and ill-treatment for expressing their cultural identity.
2. Empathize with Palestinian students and staff. Understand that they are experiencing trauma and are heavily affected by these issues. Do not silence them but instead seek to help and support by sending out an abundance of sincere resources.
3. Include and support Palestinian voices in human rights and equity education.
4. Assure TDSB educators and students that they can discuss Palestine, its history, culture, traditions and resilience. Assure them that they can wear Palestinian scarves (keffiyehs) without facing backlash or being reprimanded.
5. Consult with major stakeholders in a transparent manner when it comes to nuanced issues of equity. Engage students affected by the issue and offer sincere supports.

6. Adopt a definition of antisemitism that is decolonial and does not perpetuate unfair power relationships between a state and its occupied people. The IHRA definition dehumanizes Palestinians and has been rejected by many university faculty associations for this reason.
7. Issue an apology to Desmond Cole for the unfair treatment he received for saying “Free Palestine.” Ensure justice for any student and staff who have been subject to suspension or expulsion as a result of their advocacy of pro-Palestinian viewpoints or asked to remove their keffiyeh.
8. Implement a fair policy and timeline on any future investigations of educators on human rights work so that the unreasonable and unfair situation that Mr. Davila and students who have worn Palestinian scarves (keffiyehs) endured is not repeated again.
9. Align TDSB’s stance on human rights with that of the United Nations Human Rights Council, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch. The TDSB has a Human Rights Office that should play a proactive role in addressing the human rights concerns of TDSB Palestinian staff, students, and allies.

The demonstration occurs in the wake of the Toronto District School Board’s investigation of Javier Davila, an educator in equity, diversity and inclusion. Mr. Davila’s investigation, which led to him being put on home assignment, was ordered when he shared critical educational resources about Palestine. He was reinstated soon after and cleared of any erroneous and bad faith accusation of antisemitism; but in the interim, Mr. Davila faced abuse and criticism online from journalists and others.

The Toronto writer and activist Desmond Cole also faced criticism and online abuse soon after his comment to “Free Palestine,” made when he was speaking as the invited guest of the Toronto District School Board. Both these instances of censorship galvanized the student protest. In a recent article, [“Under Investigation: Anti-Palestinian racism at the Toronto District School Board”](#), Mr. Cole wrote about his experience and the experiences of Toronto District School Board students that included being told to remove their keffiyehs (traditional Palestinian scarves) because they were perceived as symbols of antisemitism, and even a suspension for wearing it to school; and another for uttering “Free Palestine” on the announcements.

On Monday, November 8, students began to discuss how they could support Mr. Cole and Mr. Davila, and by Tuesday they decided to take action. By Wednesday, word spread on social media centering around the fact that a student was suspended for wearing a traditional Palestinian scarf, a keffiyeh. Teachers were not involved because the students wanted to protect their teachers from being targeted and punished by the TDSB, as has been done to Mr. Davila and other educators. On Thursday, many

students came to school wearing their keffiyehs to express Palestinian culture and faced a backlash from staff. Word of those reactions spread, and it drove more students to join the cause.

Tension was high on Friday. Students arrived wearing keffiyehs and colours of the Palestinian flag (green, white, red, black) and posters they had been crafting all week. A mysterious interruption in the school's WiFi at 10 AM intimated the possibility that the administration was aware of the walkout and was trying to suppress it. But at exactly 11 AM on November 12, students got up from their desks, started chanting as they walked down the hallways, and as a result encouraged other students to do the same. The hallways echoed with voices chanting together.

“This walkout was planned within a week by a group of brave students who were not associated with any club, just concerned and disturbed by what the TDSB stands for. We contacted the media and the author of the article, Desmond Cole, who was there to support us all the way from Nova Scotia. He helped prepare us for what to expect, and helped with support from the community,” one of the students said.

Many stopped their cars and joined the protest outside the high school. Marc Garneau Collegiate Institute currently has a population of 988 students, and a majority of the students are born outside Canada.

“We got together and decided to walk out because enough is enough. Students are not allowed to express their Palestinian culture without fear of suspension or worse. Things as simple as Palestinian poetry and dance. It's as if the culture is to be erased,” one demonstrator said.

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