

THREE TEACHERS TRIED TO GIVE PALESTINIAN STUDENTS A SAFE HAVEN — AND IT COST THEM THEIR JOBS

The Philadelphia school ordered teachers to “stay neutral” on Israel’s war on Gaza, but they helped students make pro-Palestine posters.

Emily Rizzo

December 3 2024, 5:00 a.m.



From left to right: Former Baldi Middle School teachers Caroline Yang, Jordan Kardasz, and Emily Antrilli stand for a portrait in Philadelphia on May 8, 2024. Photo: Hannah Yoon

MOHAMMED, A MIDDLE school student in Philadelphia, puts on his “Free Gaza” bracelet as routinely as he brushes his teeth. He often wears a keffiyeh around his shoulders, despite, he said, being told at school to take it off.

“He’s so sure about who he is and what he wants to represent, he doesn’t care,” said Mariam, his mother.

Like many young Palestinian students across the country, Mohammed, who like his mother asked to use a pseudonym for fear of reprisals, has grown more political over the last year. His grandmother lives in the West Bank, and two of his cousins were killed by the Israeli military, part of the civilian death toll of Israel’s war on Gaza.

In November 2023, Mohammed’s English teacher at Philadelphia’s Baldi Middle School, Caroline Yang, and two other seventh grade teachers, Emily Antrilli and Jordan Kardasz, sensed Mohammed and other Muslim and Palestinian students needed a safe place to express themselves. Yang opened her classroom after school. The war was around a month old, and emotions were running high on all sides.

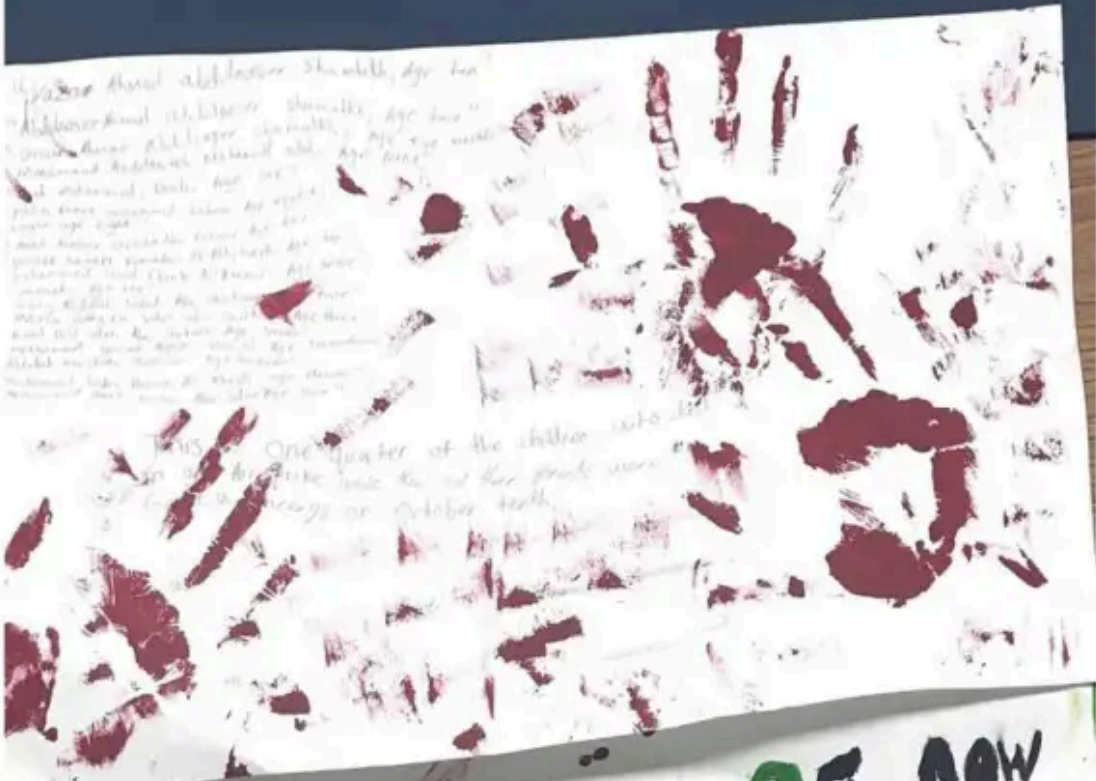
The students decided to make posters. One listed names of Palestinian children killed by Israeli soldiers. Another showed a dove between Israeli and Palestinian flags. Some of the posters were adorned with slogans like “End apartheid,” “This is not war, this is genocide,” and “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.” Some of the posters contained red handprints; other handprints showed the red, white, green, and black of the Palestinian flag.

“They don’t want us to be loud. They don’t want us to be anything.”

The teachers put up the signs, along with a Palestinian flag, in the school's commons on November 17, 2023. The new display would accompany the flags of over 30 other nations, including Israel's. Within an hour, before classes began, the school removed them, according to the teachers and a principal's report obtained by The Intercept.

Soon, the posters would become the flashpoint in allegations and recriminations that included accusations of anti-Palestinian, anti-Arab, and anti-Muslim bias, as well as antisemitism. By the time the dust settled with the end of the school year last summer, the fallout had hit students and teachers alike. Some parents decided to pull students from the school. The three teachers had all left their jobs – and decided to file a federal civil rights complaint.

“Silencing. Erasure,” said Mariam, Mohammed's mother, who was considering pulling both children from Baldi but ultimately kept them enrolled. “They don't want us to be loud. They don't want us to be anything.”





Unsatisfactory Incident SEH-204

END APARTHEID
FREE GAZA!

END THE
FREE P
FREE

GAZA NOW!
END THE Blockade

Tom

The RIVER

The

SEA

lales fine

Can Be FREE



This
is not



Unsatisfactory Incident SEH-204



Free Palestine
Free Gaza



FROM THE
RIVER TO
THE SEA
PALESTINE



FREE PALESTINE



Unsatisfactory Incident SEH-204

Posters made by students at Baldi Middle School, as shown in photographs from an Unsatisfactory Incident form filed about one of the teachers, Caroline Yang. Photos: Philadelphia School District

Strife in Schools

Across the country, students and educators who have advocated for Palestinians have faced [censorship](#) and [professional repercussions](#). The Council on American Islamic Relations, the country's largest Muslim civil rights organization, is suing a Maryland school district for allegedly placing three teachers on administrative leave [for supporting Palestinian rights](#). Last October, two Minnesota public high school students [were suspended](#) for chanting "from the river to the sea."

In Philadelphia schools, Israel's war on Gaza had already sparked a furor. Protests erupted after a student podcast was [censored](#) by the district, and ad hoc groups have formed to make [demands](#) about Palestinian rights from the school system. The district has since suspended the teacher who assigned the censored project and who faced allegations of bias against supporters of Israel. District parents have [since petitioned](#) for her reinstatement and [questioned the district's motives](#).



Related

University Professors Are Losing Their Jobs Over “New McCarthyism” on Gaza

As for Yang, Antrilli, and Kardasz, the teachers at Baldi, school district communications officer Christina Clark said Philadelphia schools seek to create inclusive learning environments in the full knowledge that their actions will shape students’ lives, but would not comment on personnel matters. Baldi’s principal, Bianca Gillis, did not respond to The Intercept’s multiple requests for comment. In a report summarizing multiple disciplinary hearings, Gillis wrote that the posters and flag caused staff pain and “had a negative and profound impact on Israeli and non Israeli staff.”

“We encourage all of us, staff, community members, and stakeholders of all kinds, to be the role models they deserve,” Clark wrote in a statement to The Intercept. She said the district has held two student forums to allow dialogue between the communities involved. The district has also partnered with the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education for workshops with district and school leaders “to increase understanding of antisemitism and Islamophobia.”

“I would not be able to sit right with myself if, as a teacher, I didn’t do anything while a genocide is happening.”

For the teachers, however, facilitating the posters was more than just a nod to inclusivity.

“With that many Palestinian students in our school,” Yang said, “I would not be able to sit right with myself if, as a teacher, I didn’t do anything while a genocide is happening.”

The Backlash

A month after the posters and flag were put up and taken down, the principal recommended that the district suspend the teachers without pay for five days and transfer them to different schools. The subsequent investigation, concluded in April, confirmed the disciplinary measures, though by the time the process was over, the recommendation for Kardasz’s transfer had been rescinded.

In May, with a month left in the school year, district officials ordered the teachers to stop teaching and work from home. Before the suspensions could be imposed, all three teachers resigned. None of them felt that they could be good teachers under the circumstances.





Top/Left: The exterior of Baldi Middle School in Philadelphia on May 8, 2024. Bottom/Right: Baldi teacher Jordan Kardasz wears a watermelon pin in support of Palestine on May 8, 2024. Photos: Hannah Yoon

The punishments were related to allegations that the teachers disobeyed an order to stay neutral on the war in Gaza, violated an administrative directive to email suggestions on ways to support the school community to the principal, broke three district policies, and

created a “hostile work environment” for other staff members, according to disciplinary reports obtained by The Intercept. Other teachers, the report said, were afraid of “continued antisemitism” at work.

“Your actions indicate a select group of teachers exclusively, intentionally and purposefully discussing, planning and engaging students in an activity that was not discussed or approved with the administration of Baldi school and undermined efforts to address a serious and difficult issue for students and staff,” Gillis wrote in a disciplinary report.

When they were ordered to work from home, the teachers were told not to discuss the matter with other colleagues or students.



[Read Our Complete Coverage](#)

Israel's War on Gaza

“My thought process was that it would start a conversation,” said Yang. “I never thought that it would lead to the backlash that it did.”

In response, the teachers, who were all in their first year at Baldi, filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights, alleging that the school discriminated against Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim students, infringed on students’ First Amendment-protected speech, and disciplined the teachers for their support of Palestinian students and Palestinian human rights.

“I want teachers who are going through something similar, who feel silenced at their schools, to know it’s not just them,” said Yang. “The

district needs to protect teachers' right to teach and talk about Palestine, not leave it up to each principal's will."

The federal complaint also alleged that the school rescinded accommodations for Muslim students to make an afternoon prayer during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. Mohammed and other Muslim students said they had not been allowed to carry out the time-specific prayer. Clark, the district spokesperson, told The Intercept that students can pray during school hours, but prayer should not be held during instructional time to minimize "academic interruption."

The civil rights complaint and students interviewed by The Intercept, including Mohammed, have also alleged that educators told them to remove their keffiyehs, the checkered Palestinian scarves. (Clark said that Baldi students "may wear keffiyehs on dress down days and during the regular school day.")

The Department of Education is evaluating the complaint and has not yet made a determination on whether it will open an investigation into the district, according to an attorney who helped the teachers file the complaint.

Censoring Student Speech

In Philadelphia schools, Arabic is the fifth-most spoken language, [according to the district](#), with a large number of Arab students residing in northeast Philadelphia, where Mohammed lives.

At Baldi, the school has instituted "healing circles" led by the district's diversity, equity, and inclusion office, with students responding overwhelmingly to a school survey that they feel safe and supported, according to the report from Gillis, the Baldi principal.

In October, however, the school’s assistant principal directed teachers to stay “neutral” on Gaza, according to the teachers. And in November 2023, during an all-staff meeting, Gillis gave a verbal directive that teachers must email her if they have suggestions for ways to support students. The teachers hung the posters and flag despite that order – followed by the response from other faculty members described in internal reports.





Top/Left: Sisters stand next to each other at a park in Philadelphia on June 11, 2024.

Bottom/Right: A student at their home in Philadelphia on June 9, 2024. Photos: Hannah Yoon

“Staff members shared concerns of being safe in our building and that the Jewish community felt discriminated against, marginalized and hated,” says one of the disciplinary reports obtained by The Intercept.