

NEWS | EDUCATION & YOUTH

Censorship in Los Angeles School District Could Become National Norm, Educators Warn

Educators in the country's second-largest school district are facing repression in the wake of a new California law.

By Marianne Dhenin, TRUTHOUT
August 12, 2026



A classroom is seen at Wilson Elementary School in Lynwood on Monday, July 1, 2024, in Los Angeles, California.

DANIA MAXWELL / LOS ANGELES TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES

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Teachers in the second-largest school district in the nation have had to remove Black Lives Matter, Land Back (<https://nativeamericantoday.com/the-land-back-movement/>), and Palestinian flags from their classrooms as part of so-called corrective actions taken following a complaint alleging discrimination. The changes occurred at Downtown Magnets High School in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). The district has over half a million students and 1,500 schools and centers.

“Part of the thing that makes this very difficult, and also that makes it very pressing for people to understand, [is] if LAUSD falls and starts to institute policies that create censorship, this is going to be a model across the country,” Jessica Rodarte, National Education Association vice president for United Teachers Los Angeles (<https://utla.net/>) (UTLA) and vice-chair of the California Teachers Association (<https://www.cta.org/>),’s Civil Rights in Education Committee, told *Truthout*.

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The changes at Downtown Magnets High School followed a complaint filed in March (<https://www.scribd.com/document/1038842826/Los-Angeles-Unified-School-District-Determination>) (<https://www.scribd.com/document/1038842826/Los-Angeles-Unified-School-District-Determination>) with LAUSD’s Office of Student Civil Rights by Emet Legal Services, alleging violations of anti-discrimination statutes, including Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and California’s Assembly Bill (AB) 715. Specifically, the complaint, which *Truthout* reviewed, alleged that Tiffany Do, an 11th-grade social studies and health teacher, had created a hostile environment for Jewish faculty and students by displaying Palestinian flags in the classroom, wearing a keffiyeh in their staff photo on the school’s website and sometimes on campus, and “fail[ing] to present pro-Israel or pro-Zionist speech, posters, or classroom content.” The complaint claimed Do had “indoctrinate[d] students to become political activists while silencing and intimidating Jewish and Israeli-American staff and students.”

“When it first came down, to use the current slang, I was crashing out, not having a good time, in shock, really upset that this could happen, wondering ‘Why me?’” Do told *Truthout*. “But this is so beyond me at the end of the day. This is about the state and the state of education, and this is about Palestine and liberation movements, and it’s about censorship.”

The complaint was among the first to be filed citing AB 715, a state law that passed last year in a process its opponents, as well as some lawmakers, characterized as undemocratic (<https://newsletter.mariannedhenin.com/a-growing-coalition-is-fighting-censorship-in-californias-public-schools/>). The bill was one in a long line (<https://truthout.org/articles/ca-educators-are-resisting-anti-palestine-bills-pushing-academic-police-state/>), championed by California’s Legislative Jewish Caucus (<https://jewishcaucus.legislature.ca.gov/>) that opponents argued sought to censor classroom instruction (<https://truthout.org/articles/california-ethnic-studies-bill-aims-to-censor-palestine-related-education/>) on Palestine, as well

as other Palestine-related speech in public schools. A diverse coalition [\(https://defendcaeducation.org/\)](https://defendcaeducation.org/) that included California's largest and most powerful unions of teachers and faculty — as well as the Coalition for Liberated Ethnic Studies [\(https://ethnicsudies-coalition.org/\)](https://ethnicsudies-coalition.org/), American Civil Liberties Union California Action, and local branches of Jewish Voice for Peace from across the state — organized against the bill.

Sources told *Truthout* they are now seeing the far-reaching consequences [\(https://truthout.org/articles/educators-worry-palestine-censorship-could-reshape-public-education-entirely/\)](https://truthout.org/articles/educators-worry-palestine-censorship-could-reshape-public-education-entirely/), many warned would follow AB 715's passage, including ramped-up attacks on teachers and disruptions to the rollout of ethnic studies classes, which earlier state legislation [\(https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB101\)](https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB101) made a graduation requirement. “What we’re seeing is school districts are afraid to roll out ethnic studies,” Guadalupe Carrasco Cardona, a high school educator and member of the Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Consortium [\(https://www.liberatedethnicsudies.org/\)](https://www.liberatedethnicsudies.org/), told *Truthout*. “We’re seeing that when teachers say, ‘Hey, we’re supposed to have ethnic studies. Why aren’t we having ethnic studies?’ They’re being discouraged from teaching ethnic studies.”

Cardona told *Truthout* that part of that fear stems from the actions of Zionist groups that are using AB 715 to pressure schools to censor teaching on Palestine, settler colonialism, and related themes, and to incorporate pro-Israel talking points into classroom materials. *Truthout* [\(https://truthout.org/articles/amendments-protecting-pro-palestine-speech-in-california-schools-face-backlash/\)](https://truthout.org/articles/amendments-protecting-pro-palestine-speech-in-california-schools-face-backlash/) previously reported [\(https://truthout.org/articles/amendments-protecting-pro-palestine-speech-in-california-schools-face-backlash/\)](https://truthout.org/articles/amendments-protecting-pro-palestine-speech-in-california-schools-face-backlash/) that the Alliance for Constructive Ethnic Studies [\(https://www.caethstudies.org/\)](https://www.caethstudies.org/) (ACES) was emailing school administrators with instructions on “preparing for AB 715 compliance.” ACES positions itself in direct opposition to a critical or liberated approach to ethnic studies, which it claims promotes a “militant, anti-Western agenda [and] views history and civics entirely through a racial lens.” Its outreach around AB 715 gives “Free Palestine” flags and other Palestine-related visuals as examples of “discriminatory” classroom material.

“A lot of these very anti-Palestine organizations are tabling and are getting contracts to do ethnic studies training,” Cardona told *Truthout*. She cited the Anti-Defamation League [\(https://truthout.org/articles/members-of-educators-union-say-its-capitulation-to-ad-betrays-workers-students/\)](https://truthout.org/articles/members-of-educators-union-say-its-capitulation-to-ad-betrays-workers-students/) and ACES as examples of such groups, which she said are “passionate about controlling what ethnic studies is and ensur[ing] Palestine does not ever enter any of the lessons.”

Ilana Cohen filed the March complaint against Do in her role as founding director of Emet Legal Services. Cohen also serves as community engagement director at ACES. Do was also asked to turn over classroom materials, as well as email correspondence containing the words “Israel” or “Palestine,” among other related keywords, in a public records request filed by ACES in December 2025, according to a copy of that request reviewed by *Truthout*. The March complaint was filed within days of Do turning over documents to complete that public records request.

When the complaint was filed, it triggered an investigation covering the previous six months of Do's curricular material, classroom decorations, and professional conduct. Do was interviewed and required to turn over classroom materials, this time to the Office of Student Civil Rights. The school's principal, history and ethnic studies coordinators, director and operations coordinator, and 15 students in Do's classes were also interviewed.

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The findings of the investigation (<https://www.scribd.com/document/1038842826/Los-Angeles-Unified-School-District-Determination>) were announced in late April. It found that Do had used only “limited Israel-Palestine-related” materials, including a single (<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/ireland-recognized-palestinian-statehood-solidarity>) *Teen Vogue* (<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/ireland-recognized-palestinian-statehood-solidarity>) article (<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/ireland-recognized-palestinian-statehood-solidarity>) about Ireland’s solidarity with Palestine, which was offered as one of seven possible options during a reading assignment, and *Democracy Now!’s* Top U.S. and World Headlines segment. Students watched those segments every Tuesday, and the segments sometimes referenced the war on Gaza. “I’m just trying to connect what I teach to real-world stuff,” Do told *Truthout*. “That way my kids really synthesize and understand that what they’re learning in the classroom is incredibly relevant to what’s happening in the world.”

The report also stated that the district’s staff relations department had reviewed the keffiyeh that Do sometimes wore and their Palestine-related classroom decorations in October 2024, before AB 715 became law. At that time, the department asked Do to remove a poster depicting a woman wearing a hijab and a keffiyeh that read “Stop the genocide. We are not the enemy.” But the department did not ask them to stop wearing a keffiyeh or to remove Palestinian flags from the classroom.

Students interviewed as part of this year’s investigation “generally described the classroom environment as open, nonjudgmental, comfortable, or relaxed,” according to the investigation’s findings. Students said they could “share different opinions or disagree without issue” and reported that neither their teacher nor classmates made “comments specifically targeting Jewish people, Israeli people, or Zionism.”

Though students reported feeling comfortable in their classroom, the investigation nonetheless concluded that the environment “reflected discriminatory bias in instruction within the meaning of AB 715,” and it has led to a crackdown on campus. Not only have Palestinian flags been ordered taken down; Black Lives Matter and Land Back flags have also been ordered removed, Do told *Truthout*, with one exception for a Black Lives Matter flag in the classroom where the school’s Black Student Union meets. Do said the reason given for removing the flags was that they amounted to “political advocacy.”

“This is not just an attack on the issue of Palestine and Palestinian existence,” Do told *Truthout*. “It’s an attack on all people of color who try to fight for our histories to be included and who historically have had to do that.”

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The district’s mandated corrective actions also included holding a professional development session to share the investigation’s findings; reviewing all instruction materials used in history, social science, and ethnic studies classes and removing materials deemed one-sided; and rolling out a new reporting mechanism to make it easier to launch similar investigations in the future. Do told *Truthout* that a requirement to review materials will disrupt education on current events, simply because the news cycle tends to move much faster than review procedures.

Notably, the investigation did not find that Do’s wearing a keffiyeh constituted discrimination. But the complainant has appealed that finding. The original complaint characterized a keffiyeh as “not only a political symbol, but one that promotes a political agenda of extremism,” and claimed the scarves are “widely used by leaders, members, and supporters of terrorist groups,” citing an “info sheet” from one pro-Israel advocacy group.

Educators who spoke to *Truthout* said flags have only been removed and other corrective measures are only being implemented at Downtown Magnets High School at this time. But all of them are concerned about the dangerous precedent this case could set. LAUSD did not respond to *Truthout*’s questions before the deadline for publication.

“This, at the end of the day, is about censorship,” said Rodarte. “We need to think about that and really consider if this is what we want to do in a country that has always valued freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of petition, and critique of government.”

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