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Schools are No Place for the ADL

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November 15, 2023. Jewish Voice for Peace shuts down Hollywood Blvd. to protest Israel's genocide in Gaza.

Launched in 1913 to counter antisemitism and discrimination, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) now resembles a mythological shapeshifter that presents alternately as a civil rights organization and a pro-Israel propagandist.

In its “No Place for Hate” program that caters to both elementary and secondary schools, the ADL’s stated mission is to empower students, teachers and parents to “stand against bias and bullying ...” with school-wide pledges, projects and games aimed at celebrating diversity and stamping out hate in the halls, in the cafeteria, in the reading circle, anywhere that hate may manifest.

In Norse mythology, the jealous god Loki is a shapeshifter who appears alternately as a salmon or an old woman. Disguised as the old woman, Loki—the god of darkness—carves an arrow out of mistletoe to trick the blind god Hodr into hurling an arrow at his exalted twin brother, Baldr—the god of light.

The ADL is not a salmon or a singular old woman, but a cunning policy advocate that despite allegations of spying on social justice movements and targeting Arab-led organizations has popularized its “No Place for Hate” lessons in 2,000 schools, reaching 190,000 educators and 1.8 million students—according to the ADL website.

In the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) of over 500,000 students, No Place for Hate schools either currently or previously included Roosevelt High School, Amelia Earhart Middle School, Benjamin Franklin Elementary School, Mark Twain Elementary School and others. The LAUSD Office of Student Civil Rights links to the ADL under “Tools for Educators,” which in turn links to an article attacking American Muslims for Palestine for “being at the core of the anti-Israel and anti-Zionist movement in the United States.” In 2022, LAUSD board member Scott Schmerelson, now board president and often a champion of public education, authored a resolution instructing the superintendent to invite the ADL to update and revise curriculum.

While selling schools on activities to bolster respect and community, the ADL—analogue to the shapeshifter in mythology – engineers the death of debate over Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish nationalist state in historic Palestine.

In a No Place for Hate lesson on scapegoating, the ADL writes, “Debates about the legitimacy of Israel’s existence or demonization of Israelis create an unsafe climate for Jewish students and interrupt opportunities for critical thinking for all students.” Notice how the ADL wrongly mixes debate over a nation state’s political ideology with demonization of individuals in that state—all in the same sentence to discourage critical analysis and evaluation .

Schools that subscribe to this sort of speech suppression, ruling out debate over an ethnostate colonizing, annihilating and terrorizing Palestinians, are like the blind brother who hurls a lethal dart—only this time the weapon of propaganda pierces the institution of education to silence inquiring minds wrestling with the devastation live-streamed on their cell phones.

In Japanese mythology, the nine-tailed kitsune-yako fox can take human form to infiltrate high society, where the yako appears as a seductive woman to level a lethal curse—a scar, a burn—on an unsuspecting yet powerful man.

If only the man had been more observant, he might have noticed a few furry fox tails sticking out of the back of the yako’s dress. Yes, the shapeshifter can be unmasked provided those it targets are willing to look behind the facade.

The lure of a packaged curriculum

The ADL lures schools with its anti-bias No Place for Hate program by claiming to help administrators, teachers and parents build “inclusive and safe communities in which respect and equity are the goals and where all students can thrive.” It’s hard to resist such a pitch, particularly when it comes with banners, buttons, balloons and bracelets as part of a polished package that outlines a step-by-step approach to creating community through “I Am” poems, peer-to-peer interviews, school surveys and collages of diverse smiling students.

The program, however, warrants deeper analysis, so best to begin with the basics.

How a School Qualifies–Registration

Schools that want to become a “No Place for Hate” school first must register with the ADL, which could be a problem for anyone concerned about allegations of ADL surveillance. The Guardian reports an internal 2020 ADL memo reveals the ADL

tracked a Black Indianapolis activist who worked on the Deadly Exchange campaign to expose US police training with the Israeli military. “It scared the shit out of me,” the activist told the press, adding “It stopped me from moving forward because I don’t want to put people in my life at risk – I work with youth, so it stopped me in my tracks.” Decades earlier, the Washington Post reported that police in the 1990s investigated the ADL for allegedly “monitoring the activities of thousands of activists”–allegations the ADL denied. According to the newspaper, San Francisco police confiscated from ADL offices “leaked copies of confidential law enforcement reports, fingerprint cards, driver’s license photographs and individual criminal histories drawn from police records.”

Next, committee & pledge

After registering with the ADL, schools then form a steering committee of faculty and students to guide the work of building community and challenging bias at every turn. No mention is made of centering students victimized by bullying and racism to spearhead the committee, which is charged with encouraging students, staff and guardians to sign a schoolwide pledge. For elementary schools, the pledge reads, “I promise my best to be kind to everyone—even if they are not like me.” For secondary, the pledge is more proactive, “I will reach out to support those who are targets of hate.”

The entire school is expected to sign the pledge which features a logo with the words, ‘No Place for Hate’– An ADL Education Program.” While the words are innocuous enough, the platforming of the ADL raises concerns about elevating an organization with a history of surveillance, complaints against public schools and unconditional support for Israel. This patronage continues in the wake of the International Court of Justice’s preliminary ruling (1/26/24) that Israel has committed a plausible case of genocide, and Amnesty International’s (12/5/24) scathing report, *You Feel Like You Are Subhuman’: Israel’s Genocide Against Palestinians in Gaza*,

There’s another issue, too. While there’s nothing in the wording of the pledge that’s problematic, the fact that virtually everyone is expected to sign it in order for the school to participate can create a coercive environment.

Only ADL approved activities

After students and staff sign the ADL pledge, they then move on to the next criteria required for ADL designation as an official “No Place for Hate” school. Each school must implement three of

the ADL's approved activities, such as discussions around identity, listening journals and walks against hate.

For middle and high school, one of the recommended activities to lead to schoolwide action involves a lesson plan entitled, "Antisemitic Incidents: Being an Ally, Advocate and Activist," in which students are to understand and recognize antisemitism based on a troubling definition that includes the marginalization of Jewish people based on myths about Israel.

Among the "materials needed" for the lesson is a link to the ADL's "Audit of Antisemitic Incidents 2022," which says, "References to Israel or Zionism were part of 19% of the 219 campus incidents." The audit includes a section "Anti-Zionism/Israel-Related" in which the ADL smears the organizations Witness for Peace and Students for Justice in Palestine, charging antisemitic incidents were perpetrated by individuals associated with these groups. The ADL writes, "Public statements of opposition to Zionism, which are often antisemitic, are included in the Audit when it can be determined that they had a negative impact on one or more Jewish individuals or identifiable, localized groups of Jews."

Does this mean the ADL considers antisemitic any criticism of Israel that offends a Jewish person? What about the thousands of Jews marching in cities, conducting sit-ins in the Capitol and occupying subway stations with t-shirts that scream, "Ceasefire" or "Stop Arming Israel" or "Not in Our Name"—These Jews are more than offended by Israel's ethnic cleansing of Palestine; they are outraged.

Jewish Voice for Peace, a fast-growing anti-Zionist national organization, charges the ADL "is not a credible source on antisemitism and racism" because it conflates antisemitism with criticism of a state, adding, "The ADL has consistently targeted advocates for Palestinian human rights in a concerted and coordinated campaign to repress any speech that criticizes Israel's current war on Gaza or its policy of oppression of Palestinians."

The ADL has filed civil rights complaints with the Department of Education against Occidental and Pomona colleges, as well school districts in Philadelphia, Santa Ana and Berkeley. In the complaint against Berkeley, the ADL objects to student protesters of US-Israel genocide walking out of class to shout, "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free." The chant does not call for the elimination of Jews from Palestine but the right of Palestinians expelled from their homeland to return.

Additionally, the ADL, which tells students to be kind and compassionate—never bullying, writes a threatening letter to nearly 200 college presidents, demanding investigations of the non-violent Students for Justice in Palestine, the campus organization leading protests against Israel's slaughter in Gaza.

The kicker

If a school wants to implement its own activity for challenging bias and bullying, it must first appeal to the ADL for approval. Absent ADL approval, the activity cannot count toward achieving official "No Place for Hate" status. One need not be a champion of public education to cringe at the outsourcing of anti-bias education to a private political advocacy organization, particularly one that, according to the website Open Secrets, spent over a million dollars in 2024 to lobby lawmakers to vote for a pro-Israel agenda.

The ADL is, after all, an enthusiastic proponent of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism with examples that conflate criticism of Israel with antisemitism to open the door for more legal complaints against schools and colleges, even when the speech in question is constitutionally-protected free political speech, not hatred of Jews.

School to prison pipeline via the ADL

The ADL's No Place for Hate program includes a section on social justice, as opposed to simple acts of kindness, such as offering to help a teacher distribute papers or hold down a fountain faucet for another student. The ADL aptly defines a social justice action as one that involves a group of people who organize to bring about "institutional change" that might solve the problems of gun violence, homelessness or school-to-prison pipeline.

How contradictory then that the ADL encourages students and teachers to both report incidents of bias and hate to the ADL by completing an incident report form, as well as—in cases of extreme injustice—calling the police—rather than referring those involved to a student-faculty council on restorative justice that emphasizes making amends, performing school service or developing empathy through role-plays. Under the subheading, "Best Practices for School Administrators—Act Quickly and Respond, the curriculum advises principals to "clarify what the role and duties of school resource officers (SRO's) and (whether) police should and should not be in the process. Contact law enforcement as necessary."

Given the ADL's close working relationship with police, it is worth considering whether involving the ADL increases the likelihood of police involvement and a punitive rather than educational approach, potentially creating something akin to the school-to-prison pipeline that the ADL critiques.

Never mind the police for a minute. Reporting incidents—some of which may relate to criticism of Israel—to the ADL could spell legal trouble down the road, should the school's administration not follow the ADL's prescription for addressing the situation.

Moreover, despite the No Place for Hate social justice verbiage, it's hard to imagine the ADL ever approving a schoolwide letter-writing campaign to Congress to block weapons to Israel during its genocide in Gaza or testimony before school boards to divest from companies building segregated roads in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Note, the No Place for Hate glossary defines antisemitism as "The marginalization and/or oppression of people who are Jewish, based on the belief in stereotypes and myths about Jewish people, Judaism and Israel."

Antisemitism is real—white supremacy at Charlottesville, murders at the Tree of Life Synagogue, Nazi symbols at Jan.6th—but to redefine antisemitism to include criticism of Israel only confuses people while allowing a nation state to act with impunity.

Pyramid of Hate

The ADL's No Place for Hate program introduces students to the Pyramid of Hate to encourage discussion and analysis of escalating acts of bias and bigotry. At the pyramid's base is Biased Attitudes of stereotyping; one level higher is Acts of Bias, such as bullying; even higher on the pyramid is Discrimination, and at the top of the pyramid is Genocide, the act or intention to systematically annihilate a people.

Even though the curriculum has been updated since October 7, 2023 there is no mention of Israel's bombardment and starvation of over two million imprisoned Gazans, nor the multitude of experts around the world who have named Israel's actions genocide.

In No Place for Hate, students are rightfully encouraged to object to racist jokes, yet no one is encouraged to protest Israel's killing and wounding of hundreds of thousands of Gazans, tens of thousands of whom are children. A 2024 study by the Community Training Centre for Crisis Management in Gaza found "96% of children surveyed feel their death is imminent, while 49% have expressed a desire to die."

In its open letter to educators, the Drop The ADL From Schools campaign—endorsed by 89 organization—writes the ADL "attacks schools, educators, and students with bad-faith accusations of antisemitism in order to silence and punish constitutionally-protected criticism of Israel and the political ideology of Zionism." The organization asks educators to cut ties with the ADL, including use of its No Place for Hate curriculum. Meanwhile, CODEPINK activists are testifying in front of school boards on California's Central Coast, urging board members to expel the ADL.

Bottom line

For all its political correctness—the curriculum's emphasis on pronouns and respect for non-binary identities—at the end of the school day No Place for Hate personifies the mythical character of the shapeshifter as it lures school districts into checking off the anti-bias box while surrendering authority to the controversial Anti-Defamation League. Sure, the program offers banners draped across hallways, pledges and to-do lists, even sage advice now and then, but the pretty package turns ugly once fully opened and scrutinized for its pro-Israel indoctrination.

The alternative—the power within

While it's tempting for administrators to subscribe to a free, pre-packaged curriculum, there is no one-size-fits all answer to addressing racism or bullying and bias that seeps into our schools as a result of society's structural racism: segregation, caste, economic inequality, voter suppression. But this work must be done bottom up, by creating a school community of critical thinkers, principled actors, and life-long learners.

From the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) in *Creating a School Community*:

Students in schools with a strong sense of community are more likely to be academically motivated (Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Lewis, 2000); to act ethically and altruistically (Schaps, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997); to develop social and emotional competencies (Solomon et al., 2000); and to avoid a number of problem behaviors, including drug use and violence (Resnick et al., 1997).

Rather than ceding control to the Anti-Defamation League for a top-down prescription, schools can exercise their own agency to build community through schoolwide public service projects, murals that reflect students' ethnic diversity and cultural events that celebrate acts of resistance to oppression and colonization. Inside the classroom, teachers can address issues of race, bias and bullying with books and short stories that lend themselves to rich discussion.

In the final analysis ...

Educators must consider the actual cost of a free program like “No Place for Hate,” whose sponsor conflates antisemitism with anti-Zionism, files civil rights complaints against schools and promotes Israel propaganda in the classroom. The answer to creating a positive school climate is not “out there”—in the hands of an organization with a distinct political agenda—but in here, in the school and in the school-to-community relationship.

Marcy Winograd is a retired public high school teacher and literacy coach who taught English and social studies in the Los Angeles Unified School District. She is also the coordinator of CODEPINK Congress, a member of Jewish Voice for Peace and co-chair of the Central Coast Antiwar Coalition based in Santa Barbara, California.

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