



Karen Tal-Makhluf, draped in an Israeli flag, speaks at the meeting.

# Report: ‘Insufficient information’ to verify allegations of antisemitism by Marblehead educators

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An independent investigation into allegations that Marblehead Public School educators engaged in antisemitic behavior,

discrimination and unprofessional conduct has found “insufficient information” to verify most of the claims.

The report produced by attorney Allyson Kurker, of Kurker Paget LLC, was released on April 3 by interim Superintendent John Robidoux. It dismissed 37 allegations that Jewish teachers were subjected to antisemitism, that the district either ignored or retaliated against Jewish teachers who raised concerns about antisemitism, and that district personnel held Jewish teachers responsible for the actions of Israel.

“The findings ... are not intended to suggest that Marblehead is free of antisemitism, but rather that the specific incidents and events that I was asked to investigate did not return sufficient information to support an inference of a violation.,” Kurker wrote.

Two allegations were upheld. One, a knowing misrepresentation of facts, was in violation of staff conduct policy. Another, a complaint not investigated in an “adequate, fair, or neutral manner,” was in violation of the grievance procedure.

The investigation was spurred last June by allegations made by one current and three former Marblehead Public Schools teachers. Brigitte Karns, who continues to teach in the district, accused several language teachers of antisemitism. One of those, Candice Sliney, publicly denied the accusations, and has since

gone to work in another district. Three other teachers who were accused have also left the district.

Sliney could not be reached for comment, but told the Marblehead Current, “The outside firm confirmed what my colleagues and I have said from the beginning: the accusations are not credible. ... I spent my entire career working for inclusion and fighting all forms of hate including antisemitism.”

Karns could not be reached for comment.

Kurker’s report was based on interviews with 26 individuals, as well as her review of 450 pages of documents, correspondence between teachers and district personnel, and PowerPoint slides from a June 2024 webinar in which Karns detailed her allegations.

Her report examined the district’s non-discrimination and harassment policy, civil rights grievance procedure, staff conduct policy, and the town’s policy defining antisemitism.

District personnel were alleged to have “made disparaging, stereotypical and insensitive comments about Jewish people; made disparaging comments about, and mistreated, the Israeli flag; targeted Jewish teachers; and made disparaging and unfounded comments about Israel’s conduct of its war in Gaza.”

Kurker wrote: “Most allegations could not be corroborated. It bears repeating that this does not necessarily mean that a party was being deceptive when asserting the claim – but it does mean that the allegation could not be substantiated when employing the preponderance standard.”

Embedded in the report is a controversial section titled “Defining Anti-Semitism.” Marblehead’s town policy does not define antisemitism, leaving the investigator discretion. Three Jewish teachers who brought allegations urged use of the definition set forth by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA, which states that anti-Israel beliefs and actions can be construed as antisemitism). Kurker chose instead to base her conclusions on Title VII of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, and on Massachusetts law 151B, which make no mention of Israel.

The definition is a flashpoint because a teacher was alleged to have removed an Israeli flag from the high school cafeteria wall, called it “a flag of oppression,” crumpled it into a ball, and thrown it on the floor.

“It would be overreaching ... for an external investigator to adopt a non-legally binding definition of antisemitism that has not been recognized by the town or district, or the federal or state agencies that enforce workplace discrimination laws,” Kurker wrote. “The decision about whether and how to further define antisemitism is rightfully left to the Marblehead community and its leaders.”

Marblehead resident and parent Yael Magen, in public comments at the school committee meeting April 3, lashed out at the report for not embracing the IHRA definition.

“The IHRA definition simply says that anti-Zionism is antisemitism,” said Magen, who is Jewish. “Zionism is the right of self-determination of the Jewish people.”

Magen criticized Robidoux for failing to alert residents that the IHRA definition would not be used and announced her candidacy for the school committee.

Another resident and parent, Karen Tal-Makhluf, was draped in an Israeli flag as she addressed school committee members. Interviewed later, Tal-Makhluf said, “I was disappointed with the finding because I felt the evidence was pretty clear that the flag had been removed. The IHRA definition says anti-Zionism is antisemitism. If you don’t look through that lens, then someone tearing down the Israeli flag is not going to be seen as antisemitic. A teacher being harassed will be viewed more as an employee misconduct issue and not as an act of hate.”

Sally Shevory, co-president of the Marblehead Education Association, the union representing the teachers, applauded the report because it absolved the MEA of an inference of antisemitism.

“Someone had said that because we had worked with the MTA [Massachusetts Teachers Association] that we were antisemitic,” Shevory said. “That was upsetting to me and my extended family. My grandfather was a very Orthodox Jew. I grew up in an Orthodox shul. That didn’t sit well with me or the other co-president who also is Jewish.

“The bottom line is I think that the superintendent explained the investigation well. I can see that there is still a lot of pain in our community, not just from the Jewish community, but from all marginalized groups. ... I believe Marblehead has a lot of healing to do. I am hopeful that the interim superintendent can lead us in this process.”

Robidoux, at the April 3 meeting, summarized the report and responded to criticism.

“I think the unhappiness with the results doesn’t necessarily mean the investigation wasn’t done properly,” said Robidoux. “It’s just that the findings were findings, and it was done in a way that was very comprehensive.


“It was never intended to be an investigation as to whether all of Marblehead Public Schools was antisemitic. It was looking at specific allegations of personnel ... so I know that’s what people are frustrated [about]. They don’t have all the information. They can’t have it because it’s personnel.”

Robidoux said he has formed an Anti-Discrimination Committee “because of past and ongoing social issues” that will work to identify incidents of discrimination and racism.

“Our new administrative team has recognized the need to be focused on the school and district culture, and managing personnel issues in a more pointed, timely and appropriate manner,” said Robidoux. ☺

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