

## Howard County Jewish Advocacy Group (HoCoJAG) - Board of Education Candidate Questionnaire

1. Should HCPSS adopt the [IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism](#)?

Yes or No: Yes

Please explain your response:

As someone deeply invested in the educational welfare of our community—not just as a candidate for the Howard County Board of Education but also as an aunt and a friend to families within HCPSS—I am acutely aware of the troubling rise of antisemitism and its impact on students we know and love. This issue transcends policy; it's a matter of protecting the most vulnerable among us from hatred that has no place in our society.

The IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, adopted by numerous states, cities, and the national strategy to combat antisemitism, offers a valuable framework for identifying and combating this scourge. Its widespread adoption underscores the critical need for clear, actionable definitions in the fight against hate. However, we must approach its implementation with a careful balance between combating antisemitism and safeguarding free speech and academic freedom.

If elected, I will advocate for a multi-faceted approach that includes adopting the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism as a part of a broader, comprehensive strategy. This strategy will also prioritize educational initiatives to foster understanding and respect, community engagement to support all our students, and clear, effective policies to protect students from discrimination and prejudice.

My aim is to create a learning environment where every student, including those dear to me and to our community, can feel safe, valued, and empowered to achieve their full potential. By working together—educators, families, students, and advocacy groups like HoCoJAG—we can make HCPSS a model of inclusivity, understanding, and resilience against all forms of hate, including antisemitism.

Our children deserve no less than a school system that champions their safety and education. This is the commitment I make to the Howard County community.

2. Should HCPSS [anti-discrimination polices](#) protect Jewish students and staff in the same manner as other protected classes?

Yes or No: Yes

Please explain your response:

Absolutely, Howard County Public School System's anti-discrimination policies must protect Jewish students and staff with the same vigor as it does other protected classes. Being Jewish is both a matter of faith and a distinct cultural identity, deeply intertwined and indivisible. Discrimination against Jewish individuals often targets not just religious beliefs but also cultural and ethnic heritage. Ensuring Jewish community members feel safe and respected is essential to fostering a truly inclusive educational environment. Education on the multifaceted nature of Jewish identity and the real, harmful impacts of antisemitism is crucial. I believe understanding and empathy are key. HCPSS has the opportunity, and indeed the responsibility, to lead by example, ensuring that policies not only prohibit discrimination in all forms but also actively educate and cultivate an environment of respect and inclusivity for every member of the school community.

3. Should HCPSS [educational equity policies](#) help combat implicit and explicit antisemitic bias?

Yes or No: Yes

What specifically would you add to the curriculum:

HCPSS Policy 1080, focusing on educational equity, should indeed extend its protections and considerations to include Jewish students, helping combat both implicit and explicit antisemitic biases. To foster a truly inclusive and supportive educational environment, several key steps must be taken:

**Curriculum Inclusion:** Integrating Jewish history, contributions, and the realities of antisemitism into the curriculum is essential. This not only educates students on the rich tapestry of Jewish culture and heritage but also provides them with critical insights into the impacts of prejudice and the importance of diversity and tolerance.

**Combating Antisemitism:** Developing and implementing explicit policies against antisemitism is crucial. This should include educational programs aimed at identifying and addressing antisemitic behavior and ideologies, ensuring a safe and respectful learning environment for all students.

**Support Systems:** Establishing dedicated support systems for Jewish students and their families can significantly enhance their educational experience. This could include creating student groups or appointing liaisons focused on Jewish student welfare, providing a resource for addressing concerns and fostering a sense of community and belonging.

**Anti-Bullying Policies:** Strengthening existing anti-bullying policies to explicitly protect against religiously motivated harassment is imperative. Ensuring that Jewish students, like all students, are protected from bullying and discrimination is a fundamental aspect of creating a safe and nurturing school environment.

Incorporating these elements into HCPSS's approach not only aligns with the goals of Policy 1080 but also signals a commitment to diversity, inclusion, and the well-being of every student.

Recognizing the significance of the Jewish population, which represents about 6%<sup>1</sup> of residents, in Howard County, and by extension in our schools, it's clear that adopting these measures is not just beneficial but necessary for the educational and social health of our community.

4. How would you address failure of the HCPSS [Office of DEI](#) to create an inclusive environment for Jewish students where they can be valued, respected, and appreciated?

While the HCPSS Office of DEI has established a range of programs aimed at fostering a diverse and inclusive educational environment, concerns have been raised regarding its effectiveness in creating a space where Jewish students feel truly valued, respected, and appreciated. One of the primary issues is transparency, particularly in how the office measures the success of its initiatives beyond suspension rates. Despite the good intentions behind these programs, the lack of publicly available metrics for evaluating their impact leaves us questioning their efficacy, especially in addressing antisemitism.

Reports from the Jewish community suggest that incidents of antisemitism, when brought to the DEI office's attention, have not been met with the necessary transparency regarding the statistics of these incidents or the actions taken in response. Worse still, anecdotal evidence indicates that the office has at times appeared insensitive or dismissive to the concerns of Jewish students and families. This situation highlights a broader issue that is painfully felt within our community: the need for more accountable, transparent, and responsive DEI efforts to support every student, including those from the Jewish community.

To move forward, we must advocate for enhanced transparency, including the publication of detailed reports on incidents of bias and the steps taken to address them. Additionally, establishing clear, measurable goals for DEI initiatives and regular, open communication with the community about progress and challenges will be crucial in rebuilding trust and ensuring that the DEI office fulfills its mission of creating an inclusive environment for all students.

5. Should HCPSS policies regarding Student Expression supersede [policies](#) guaranteeing students a Safe, Supportive, and Non-Discriminatory environment?

Yes or No: No

Please explain your response:

Policies like Policy 9020 on Student Expression are designed to work in harmony with free speech. The policy clearly states that students have the right to express themselves as long as their actions do not infringe upon the rights of others or compromise the school's ability to provide a safe, supportive, and non-discriminatory environment. This balance ensures that freedom of expression is preserved while maintaining a respectful and inclusive educational

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.jewishdatabank.org/databank/search-results?city=Howard+County&state=Maryland&year=2019>

setting. It emphasizes the responsibility of students to engage in expression that aligns with the values of safety, inclusivity, and integrity as outlined in the HCPSS Student Code of Conduct. Ideally, these policies are interdependent, ensuring that all students can learn in an environment that is both free and secure.

Ultimately, when faced with the choice between promoting empathy and upholding free expression in schools, my stance leans towards empathy. While students undoubtedly have the right to free expression in many arenas, the unique environment of our schools should prioritize fostering a community of understanding, respect, and inclusivity. There's no need to contribute to further polarization within our schools. Education is not just about academics; it's also about teaching students to engage with the world and each other in a constructive and empathetic manner. Including lessons on civil discourse is vital, yet with the current challenges even adults face in this area, we must consider the practical implications for our teachers and administrators in managing these complex dynamics. The priority of our schools should be to create a nurturing environment that prepares our students not just academically, but socially and emotionally, to contribute positively to our society. In striving for a balance, we must ensure that our commitment to a safe, supportive, and nondiscriminatory learning environment remains unwavering.

6. HCPSS faculty and students have held walkouts, rallies, and petitions against Israel and have pressured students to sign, attend, and/or participate. This has led to discrimination, bullying, harassment, and intimidation of Jewish students.

What will you do to protect Jewish students?:

While I value the right to peaceful assembly and expression, focusing on the broader impact of school-hour walkouts and rallies—especially those centered on divisive issues like protests against Israel—is crucial. These events, despite their intentions, can introduce complexities for administrators and educators and polarize our school community, diverting attention from our primary goals of academic excellence and creating an inclusive environment. I suggest a temporary halt on such activities, advocating instead for engagement through classroom discussions, clubs, and after-school forums, which offer structured, inclusive dialogue opportunities. This approach aims not to suppress student voices but to ensure our school remains a conducive space for education and growth, balancing civic engagement with the imperative to uphold a supportive learning atmosphere for all students.

Social media posts that pressure students to participate in rallies or walkouts, especially those targeting only Israel, raise significant concerns within our educational framework. This pressure undermines the principles of free choice and can contribute to a divisive atmosphere, contrary to the values of inclusivity and respect we strive to uphold. The impact of such actions, particularly when they contribute to making Jewish students feel targeted or marginalized, directly opposes our commitment to a safe, supportive, and nondiscriminatory learning environment. Our focus must remain on promoting an educational setting where critical thinking, empathy, and mutual respect are paramount, allowing all students to engage in academic pursuits without fear of coercion or alienation. Ensuring this requires a clear stance against any form of pressure or harassment, reinforcing our dedication to literacy, numeracy, and civic education in a space that honors diversity and fosters unity.

Social media posts or petitions that include slurs against Jews, Israelis, or reference tragic historical events such as the Holocaust, pogroms, or terror attacks in a derogatory manner,

especially when made by teachers, students, or student groups, represent a clear violation of the principles of respect, inclusivity, and safety that schools must uphold. Such behavior, particularly by educators, demands immediate action. Teachers hold a position of authority and influence, and their conduct, both in and outside the classroom, should exemplify the values of empathy, respect, and understanding. When they fail to do so, it not only undermines their credibility but also harms the trust and safety of the school environment. Consequently, those found engaging in hate speech or promoting bias should be subject to a thorough investigation and, depending on the findings, placed on leave or terminated. This decisive response is crucial to maintain a school culture that respects all students and staff, ensuring a safe and conducive learning atmosphere for everyone.

*I confirm that the responses provided here are my official positions in seeking an elected position on the Howard County Board of Education and I understand that HoCoJAG reserves the right to share my responses, or decision not to respond, with interested parties.*

Signature:

*Julie Kaplan*

Date: 3/16/2024