



December 11, 2024

Debra P. Wilson
President
National Association of Independent Schools

Dear Ms. Wilson,

We are writing on behalf of leading national Jewish communal organizations to express our deep concern about remarks and activity that normalized antisemitism at the NAIS People of Color Conference (PoCC) held from December 4-7, 2024. We appreciate your engagement and ongoing communication with our community on this issue in the days since the conference and anticipate your response.

As you know, speakers at PoCC, including the keynote speaker, Dr. Suzanne Barakat, used their platforms, meant for elevating equity and justice for people of color in the independent school community in the United States, to traffic in extreme, biased, and false anti-Zionist and anti-Israel rhetoric; label the establishment of Israel a “racist” endeavor; accuse Israel of genocide; and downplay the October 7, 2023 Hamas terrorist attack.

The pervasiveness of this rhetoric and the absence of any alternate perspectives created an atmosphere that was hostile for many Jewish students and faculty members in attendance. The vast majority of the Jewish community is Zionist, supports self-determination and statehood for the Jewish people in their indigenous homeland of Israel. Anti-Zionism fuels antisemitism. Since October 7th 2023, many people claiming to be “solely” anti-Zionists have verbally and physically attacked Jews, protested in front of Jewish religious and communal institutions, and attacked Jewish owned businesses. Moreover, because the vast majority of Jews identify as Zionists, attacks on and exclusion of Zionists ultimately mean attacks on and exclusion of Jews.

In addition to contributing to the hostile atmosphere for Jewish community members, the speakers fostered an atmosphere of ahistorical bias that is antithetical to the values of NAIS. Dr. Barakat, for example, defined Zionism as when “some European Jews decided that the solution to solving antisemitism in Europe and Russia was the establishment of a state in Palestine,” a patent erasure of the millennia-old connection between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel and a flattening of Jewish identity, excluding MENA Jews who also yearned to return to their ancient homeland. She and others, such as Dr. Ruha Benjamin, used the term “genocide” in relation to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, a grossly inaccurate and misleading use of a well-defined legal term. Independent schools should champion nuanced and fact-based teaching of history and current affairs; students should learn that international conflicts are complex and easy answers and accusations are rarely a panacea.

Jewish students and faculty attending PoCC were forced to hear this damaging and antisemitic rhetoric repeated time and again and watch as their peers applauded.

These occurrences, along with others reported by Jewish attendees, display a fundamental undermining of the principles of inclusivity and equity that NAIS stands for, and a marginalization of Jewish students and educators at a time of skyrocketing antisemitism. NAIS's stated values include embracing diversity, championing inclusivity and empowering community, addressing complex issues through collaboration and advocacy. We urge you to live up to these values and champion these standards for Jewish families, students, and faculty, ensuring that they can belong and flourish as their full selves in NAIS member schools without fear of discrimination or hate.

We urge you to affirm that anti-Jewish discrimination will not be tolerated in your member schools or at your conferences. To that end, we urge you to ensure that speaker selection procedures are in place in advance of NAIS's upcoming annual conference, and any future NAIS programming, to ensure that such toxic rhetoric will not recur. In addition, we call upon NAIS leadership to issue a full and direct apology for the pervasive antisemitism at PoCC.

Perhaps the most heartbreaking report we received from the conference was from a Jewish student who stated that he and his peers "felt so targeted, so unsafe, that we tucked our Magen Davids [Jewish stars, a historic symbol of Jewish peoplehood] in our shirts and walked out as those around us glared and whispered." No student should ever be made to feel this way because of their identity. Indeed, we know that the entire purpose of PoCC is to ensure that this does not happen.

Each of our organizations is here as a resource and can provide education on Jewish identity, the long history of antisemitism, and nuanced contextualization for presenting about and teaching the Israel-Hamas conflict. We hope you will partner with us in making sure that the damage done to the Jewish community at PoCC this year will never happen again.

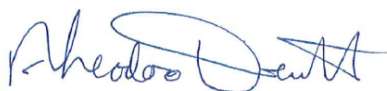
Sincerely,



Paul Bernstein
Chief Executive Officer,
Prizmah: Center for Jewish Day Schools



The Hon. Eric D. Fingerhut
Chief Executive Officer & President,
Jewish Federations of North America
Member of Congress (1993-95)



The Hon. Ted Deutch
Chief Executive Officer
American Jewish Committee (AJC)
Member of Congress (2010-22)



Jonathan Greenblatt
CEO and National Director,
Anti-Defamation League