UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
OFFICE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

THE ACTING ASSISTANT SECRETARY

March 10, 2025

By Email

Rhea Law, President
University of South Florida
Office of the President
4202 E. Fowler Avenue, CGS 401
Tampa, Florida 33620

Dear Ms. Law:

As you are aware, since the October 7, 2023, Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel, the United States has endured an eruption of antisemitic activity, primarily in educational institutions. In colleges, universities, and K-12 schools, antisemitic protestors and antagonists have harassed and committed violence against Jewish students—denying them equal access to educational programs and activities.[1] Americans watched in shock as mobs of campus malcontents erected encampments, occupied buildings, and spit on, threatened, assaulted, and blocked Jewish students from going to class or traveling about campus freely.

The previous administration failed to meet the moment. Rather than direct the United States Department of Education's (Department) Office for Civil Rights (OCR) to investigate the institutions that tolerated this contemptible antisemitic harassment and violence, the prior administration remained tepid, either reaching toothless resolution agreements with schools or allowing complaints to accumulate. That state of affairs ended on January 20, 2025.

I write to remind you of your legal obligations under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VI), and to emphasize that, under President Trump and Secretary McMahon, OCR will no longer tolerate these unlawful practices.

OCR is responsible for enforcing Title VI against schools that receive financial assistance from the Department. Title VI protects all students, including students who are or are perceived to be Jewish, from discrimination based on race, color, or national origin.[2] This protection extends to antisemitic conduct if that conduct is based on actual or perceived (i) shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics, or (ii) citizenship or residency in a country with a dominant religion or distinct religious identity. Accordingly, OCR may investigate complaints that students have been subjected to ethnic or ancestral slurs or stereotypes, or harassed based on their surname, ties to other areas of the world, or for how they look, dress, or speak in ways linked to ethnicity or ancestry.

[1] Throughout this letter, "school" is used generally to refer to preschool, elementary, secondary, and postsecondary educational institutions that receive federal financial assistance from the Department.
[2] *See T.E. v. Pine Bush Cent. Sch. Dist.*, 58 F. Supp. 3d 332, 354-55 (S.D.N.Y. 2014) (giving deference to U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights guidance in holding that discrimination based on shared ancestry and ethnic characteristics is prohibited by Title VI); *see also* 42 U.S.C. § 2000d; 34 C.F.R. § 100.3. Title VI does not protect students from discrimination based solely on religion. OCR refers complaints of discrimination based exclusively on religion to the United States Department of Justice. *See* Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 U.S.C. § 2000c, et seq.

Under Title VI, schools must take immediate and appropriate action to respond to harassment that creates a hostile environment.[3] A hostile environment exists where there is harassing conduct that is sufficiently severe, pervasive, or persistent so as to interfere with or limit the ability of an individual to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or privileges provided by a school.[4] In OCR's investigative experience, schools often respond to individual reports of harassment but fail to consider how the particular instance of harassment, either in and of itself, or in conjunction with other incidents of harassment, may contribute to a hostile environment. If a hostile environment based on shared ancestry exists, and the school knows or should have known about it, OCR will evaluate whether the school met its obligation under Title VI to take prompt and effective steps reasonably calculated to end the harassment, eliminate any hostile environment and its effects, and prevent harassment from recurring. Put simply, failure to take sufficient measures to address antisemitic harassment based on shared ancestry violates Title VI.

Under the leadership of President Trump, the widespread violation of Jewish students' civil rights across campuses will end. Pursuant to Title VI and in furtherance of Executive Order 14188, Additional Measures to Combat Anti-Semitism, the Department has opened directed investigations into five universities where widespread antisemitic harassment has been reported, and it is currently conducting a comprehensive inventory of existing complaints alleging antisemitic harassment and violence.

Moreover, the Departments of Education, Justice, Health and Human Services, and the General Services Administration have formed a multi-agency Joint Task Force to Combat Anti-Semitism. One of the task force's first priorities is rooting out antisemitic harassment in schools and college campuses. On March 7, 2025, the task force announced the immediate cancellation of approximately $400 million in federal grants and contracts to Columbia University because of that school's continued inaction in the face of persistent harassment of Jewish students.

The Trump Administration's commitment to ending the scourge of antisemitism is unyielding. Schools should take all lawful and appropriate measures to protect Jewish students, faculty, and staff from the predations of antisemitic antagonists, whether in the classroom, on campus, or within educational programs and activities. Schools that allow illegal activities and harassment that result in Jewish students losing equal access to school facilities are in violation of Title VI and will be subject to potential loss of federal funding.

The Department looks forward to working with you to ensure that all our Nation's students can learn in an environment that is free of race, color, or national origin discrimination.

Sincerely,

/s/
Craig Trainor
Acting Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights

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[3] *See, e.g., Zeno v. Pine Plains Cent. Sch. Dist*., 702 F.3d 655, 670 n.14 (2d Cir. 2012) (citing school districts' "longstanding legal duty to 'take reasonable steps to eliminate' racial harassment in its schools" (quoting OCR's Racial Incidents and Harassment Against Students at Educational Institutions Investigative Guidance, 59 Fed. Reg. 11448, 11450 (Mar. 10, 1994))).

[4] *See*, *e.g.*, *Zeno*, 702 F.3d at 665-66 (2d Cir. 2012) (explaining that harassment is actionable if it is "'severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive' and discriminatory in effect" (quoting *Davis ex rel. LaShona D. v. Monroe Cnty. Bd. of Educ*., 526 U.S. 629, 650-51 (1999)), and that discriminatory actions restrict "'an individual in any way in the enjoyment of any advantage or privilege enjoyed by others receiving any service, financial aid, or other benefit' under the school system" (quoting 34 C.F.R. § 100.3(b)(1))).