



DAVID FLEISHMAN
SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

July 3, 2018

Jeremy Burton
Executive Director
Jewish Community Relation Council of Greater Boston
126 High Street
Boston, MA 02110

Dear Mr. Burton,

We are writing in response to your letter of June 11, 2018 and hope to provide you with some information in response to questions you brought about "Understanding and Celebrating the Middle East Day" at Newton North High School in early May. We value our on-going partnership with the ADL, including our participation in the World of Difference Peer Leadership Program, currently entering its third year in Newton's secondary schools, and we want to keep the lines of communication open with you and your organizations.

Understanding and Celebrating the Middle East Day is a student-led cultural day created by students in a sought after senior level elective course entitled *Middle East, Latin America, and Asia Since 1945*, now in its second year and taught by a highly regarded teacher. Both last year and this year, students, with faculty supervision, organized a series of workshops and presentations by Newton North community members and outside speakers. As is the case for all of our cultural days, classes of students attend sessions accompanied by their teachers. The goal for these cultural days is to expose more students to the rich culture and complex issues that exist related to a particular topic or region, in this case, the Middle East.


For the past two years, students have invited a diverse group of presenters representing the cultural, academic and social diversity of the Middle East region. At each session, students and faculty provide context and facilitate questions and conversation. Last year, the presenters who were able to attend included various student clubs and faculty members, as well as outside groups such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), Mass Peace Action, and Seeds of Peace. This year, as you know from documents sent earlier, outside presenters included dance troupes, Brandeis and Harvard professors, and a film from the Palestinian Film Festival. This year, several of the presenters who shared Israeli perspectives on the Middle East were not able to join the line-up of presenters. While some of the day's sessions hope to broaden students' cultural perspectives, others aim to challenge the thinking of students through the presentation of multiple perspectives in a constructive and respectful setting. Care and thought is put into each part of the program, context is set, and conversation and questioning is encouraged. You can appreciate how challenging it is to have constructive, responsible dialogue about the complex issues in the Middle East in a way that respects the varying perspectives, beliefs and feelings of all members of our community.

Our skilled faculty and administrators are essential to helping our students become critical thinkers in these highly divisive and often difficult times. As you reference in your October 23, 2017 letter, our pedagogy involves presenting a range of opinions and perspectives to interpret facts, up-to-date materials from credible sources, and contextualized and balanced discussions. This year, the School Committee updated our policies and procedures to include Item **IMB: Outside Speakers or Forums Related to Contemporary Social and Political Issues**, which has guidance for how and when outside speakers may be invited and ensures there are procedures for oversight by the Principal. We work hard in Newton to educate our students in an emotionally safe and supportive environment. Teaching controversial topics may engender questions, discomfort and often criticism. We remain committed to exposing students to diverse opinions and to encouraging our faculty to teach about tough issues that require open minds and critical thought. Students will not agree with every perspective and point of view they encounter in our classrooms nor should they. Our goal is to help them formulate their own opinions and learn *how* to think, rather than *what* to think.

Your letter prompted us to figure out how to better inform our Newton parent and student community about how and why we teach about complex and controversial topics. We will be creating a clear document to this effect to go out to all parents at the start of the 2018/2019 school year that we hope will address the larger concerns and questions that some have raised.

Please do not hesitate to contact us directly if you have further questions about this issue or how we can continue to work together.

Sincerely,



David Fleishman
Superintendent of Schools

DF/cc

Cc: Mayor Fuller
Robert Trestan, Anti-Defamation League, New England
School Committee