
Protect Student Speech at Barrington High School

1 message

Rifqa Falaneh <

To: cwinkelman@barrington220.org, smcwilliams@barrington220.org

Cc:

Zoha Khalili <

> Tue, Jun 4, 2024 at 1:22 PM

Dear Dr. Winkelman and Principal McWilliams,

I write on behalf of students _____, _____, and _____, whose First Amendment rights at Barrington High School School District 220 have been chilled. If you are represented by an attorney in this matter, please forward this letter to them.

I have been informed that Principal McWilliams has sent an email to the Barrington community regarding the choice of Palestinian and Muslim students to hold the Palestinian flag during their graduation ceremony.

On May 23, during the senior graduation ceremony, these students decided to briefly hold the Palestinian flag upon receiving their diploma. During this ceremony, there were several members of the crowd yelling hostile racially motivated remarks at students such as “get him out of here” and “get the f*** out of here,” making students feel targeted and unsafe.

Following the graduation on May 29, Principal McWilliams sent an email to the Barrington community claiming that students who chose to display the flag “deviated from the conduct expectations” and described this conduct as “disruptive.” Such claims of disruption must be supported by evidence. *Mahanoy Area Sch. Dist. v. B. L. by & through Levy*, 141 S. Ct. 2038, 2047 (2021). The Principal’s claim that such speech was disruptive has no basis in fact. Here, students simply held the Palestinian flag as they walked to receive their diploma, and then folded the flag away seconds after. The graduation ceremony proceeded as usual, allowing the program to continue as planned.

The Principal’s email to the Barrington community not only fails to address the safety of Palestinian students from hostile attendees, but chills these students’ speech in a discriminatory manner. This email only touches on the Palestine flags being raised, and does not touch on other expressive activities that took place during graduation. For instance, during the graduation ceremony, another student held a paper to the camera as they were walking on stage in order to advertise their friend’s business; however, Principal McWilliams’s email did not touch on this. Additionally, McWilliams’s email also did not touch on the blow horns that were triggered, which arguably create more disruption than a flag quietly being unfolded, and is explicitly not allowed at Barrington graduations. Moreover, in 2022, a graduating student walked on stage wearing a

spiderman mask that fully covered their face, and no email was issued. We urge Barrington High School to remain consistent when responding to issues of free speech, regardless of whether it is a political or non-political matter.

This all comes in the midst of a brutal genocide taking place in Gaza, Palestine, where Israel has killed over 40,000 Palestinians. Students like _____ are from Gaza, and have experienced the death of many of his own family members as well as endured the loss of all of his familial homes. At this time, Barrington High School should be protecting and encouraging the free speech of students, rather than suppressing it.

We echo the demands of the students,

1. Publicly acknowledge and condemn the racist behavior that occurred during the graduation ceremony.
2. Allow all students to equally participate in their freedom of expression including the displaying of flags during school events.
3. Implement measures to ensure a safe and respectful environment at future school events.
4. Provide support and resources for students and families who experience harassment and discrimination.
5. Offer a public apology to the affected families for the distress and harm caused.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Rifqa Falaneh

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