

Jewish teachers file human rights complaints against Ontario school boards and unions

Twelve Jewish educators say four boards and two unions ignored antisemitism - and in some cases punished them for reporting it.

By Melanie Bennet | Juno News

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Tamara Steinberg speaking in front of the Ontario Legislature. Courtesy of Westbridge Strategies.

Twelve Jewish educators have filed human rights complaints against four Ontario school boards and two teachers' unions, alleging discrimination and, in some cases, punishment for reporting antisemitism.

The applications, announced Thursday by lawyer Kathryn Marshall, name the Toronto, York Region, Simcoe County, and Ottawa-Carleton district school boards, along with the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario and Ontario Secondary School Teachers.

The applicants allege discrimination based on creed, ethnic origin, and ancestry.

Each filed with the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario individually and is asking for their applications to be heard together.

"For too long, Jewish teachers in Ontario have gone to work facing antisemitism, and when they asked their school boards and unions for help, they were ignored and in some cases faced reprisal," said Marshall.

"The institutions responsible for protecting them must be held accountable."

The applicants are seeking \$150,000 each in general damages, a combined \$1.8 million, plus compensation for psychological counselling.

They also want enforceable policies addressing antisemitism, developed with Jewish community input, and adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism.

Michelle Outmezguine, an educator and ETFO member, said that Jewish teachers not only face harassment from colleagues but also from fellow union members.

"Instead of supporting us, our school boards and unions question our lived experiences, ostracize and silence us, and even enact discipline for speaking up," she said in a press release.

"It is a double standard, and it is unacceptable."

"Though the union's stated commitment is equity and inclusion, the impact of its action and inaction on Jewish members has been oppressive," she said.

Following the press conference, Tamara Steinberg told Juno News that "Public education should be public - without transparency there will be no accountability. That's what this legal proceeding is meant to accomplish. Accountability, we hope, will lead to justice."

"I'd like the non Jewish community to care that their children are learning that in an 'anti-oppressive' environment hate against some is perfectly acceptable," she said.

Editor's note

The Toronto and York Region District School Boards responded to our request for comment post publication.

Toronto District School Board

"It is the Board's general practice not to comment on active legal proceedings or matters involving individual employees. The Board will respond to the specific allegations through the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario process.

"What we can say is that all allegations of antisemitism and other forms of hate brought to the Board's attention are thoroughly investigated and addressed.

"Antisemitism has no place in our communities or schools. The Board has and will continue to work with community groups and agencies to combat antisemitism and to foster inclusive schools and workplaces where students and staff feel safe and welcome."

York Region District School Board

"YRDSB is committed to creating and sustaining safe, welcoming and inclusive learning and working spaces for all students and staff. To preserve the integrity of these proceedings, we are unable to comment on matters currently before the Human Rights Tribunal."

The other named school boards and unions have not responded.

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