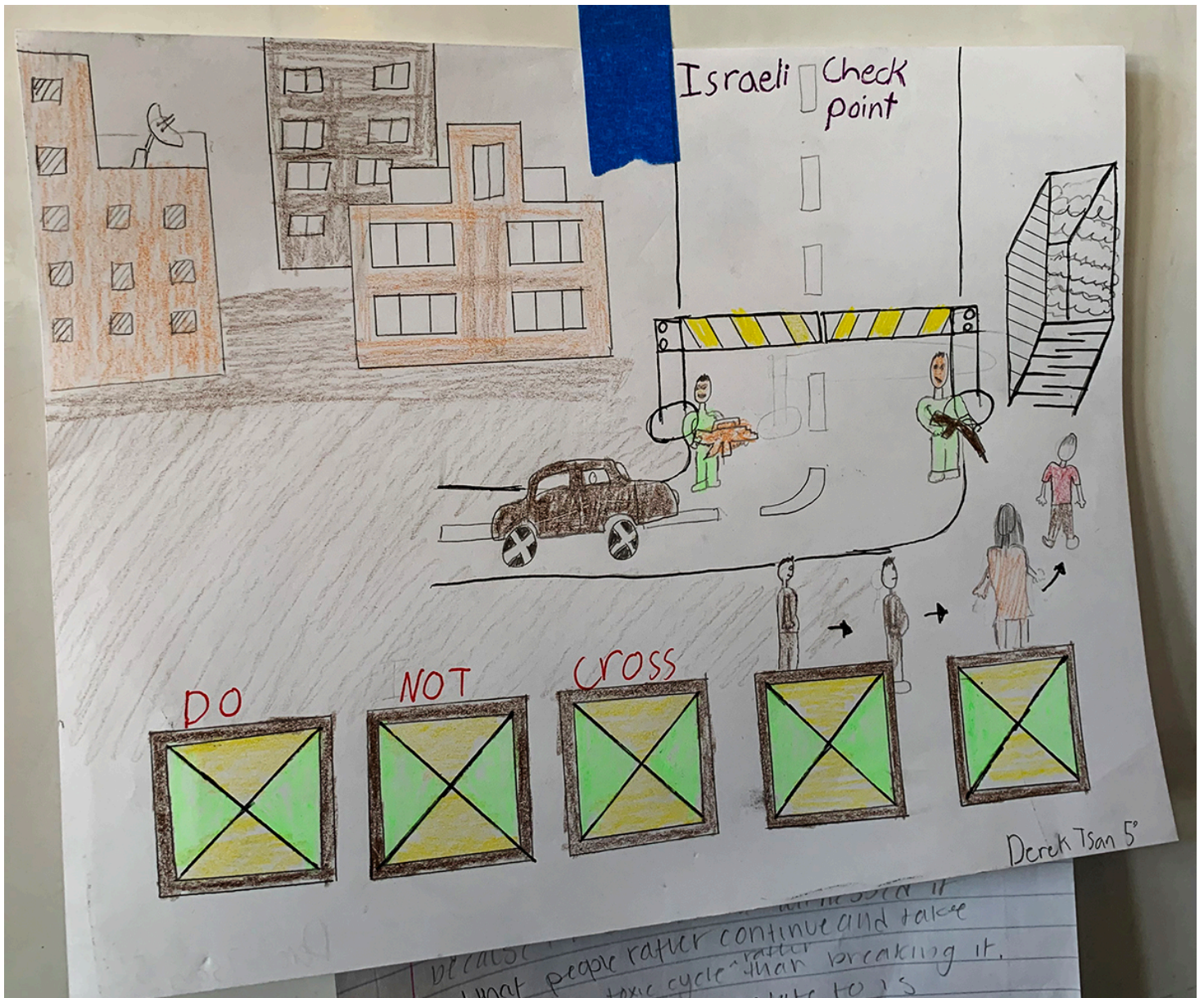


# Preparing to Teach Palestine: A Toolkit (pdf)

**A framework for educators and administrators: understanding, preparing for, and responding to backlash**



## Introduction

The past year has seen an enormous shift in the landscape for teachers who want to include Palestine in their curriculum. In California, attacks by Zionist and other right-wing organizations on the inclusion of Arab American studies—and specifically Palestine—in the CA Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC) have shone a spotlight on Palestine and importance of including it in ethnic studies curriculum. Many educators who have taught ethnic studies for years without thinking about Arab American history are reflecting on their curriculum, learning new content, and making revisions. Discussions about the pedagogical importance of comparing and contrasting settler colonialism in the US and Palestine have been central to that process. The vicious attacks that equate any mention of Palestine with antisemitism have pushed teachers, unions, and districts to understand that honest discussion of Israel's role in the oppression of Palestinians is not antisemitism.

Another factor has been the shift in public opinion in light of Israel's May 2021 bombing attacks on Gaza, their efforts to forcibly expel longtime Palestinian residents of Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan in Jerusalem, and their violent suppression of Palestinian resistance. Even media as blindly loyal to Israel as the *New York Times* have carried front page stories on the children murdered by Israeli bombs in Gaza and home demolitions in Silwan. As the violence dominated the news, students pushed their teachers to explain what was happening, and to make space for classroom discussion of the issues.

So we are seeing an upsurge in interest in learning about and teaching Palestine, often within an ethnic studies framework. At the same time, Zionists are organizing to police curriculum on Palestine. They often try to isolate and attack individual teachers to scare other educators away.

That's not a reason not to teach about Palestine, just as attacks on Black Lives Matter in Schools isn't a reason not to teach Black history. Teaching the truth about the history of the US is a liberatory act, for teachers and for students. Teaching the truth about Palestine is also a liberatory act, for teachers and for students. It's a political decision. But, as much as possible, you want to be strategic. The goal is for your anti-racist teaching to be sustainable, and to be part of a larger movement. This is a road we're making by walking, but this toolkit provides a brief framework for thinking about how to approach teaching about Palestine.

## Understanding Zionist Backlash

Given the attacks on teaching about Palestine, it's important for us as educators to understand the nature of the attacks and where they're coming from. These aren't spontaneous protests from random individuals; they are led, organized and financed by Zionist organizations in the United States and Israel.

Zionism is a nationalist, colonial ideology that, from the late 19th century on, has called for the creation and expansion of Israel as a Jewish state in historic Palestine by any means necessary. As support for Palestine and criticism of Israel's apartheid policies have grown in the US and internationally, Zionist organizations have stepped up their efforts to silence discussion of Palestine/Israel in movement circles, on college campuses, and now in K-12 education.



The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the Jewish Community Resource Council (JCRC), and Simon Wiesenthal's Museum of Tolerance are some of the most active Zionist organizations fighting against Palestine curriculum K-12. All three organizations have tried to position themselves as advocates and experts on anti-bias education.

Both the ADL and the Museum of Tolerance have enormous influence in the construction and dissemination of what they call anti-bias curriculum in California's public schools. However, as Zionist organizations, their primary goal is to stunt the development of authentic anti-racist curriculum to ensure an Israel-friendly analysis. They want to prevent teachers and students from making connections between the US and Israel as white settler states, or apartheid-era South Africa and the current apartheid in Israel. They also want to prevent an understanding of Islamophobia that reveals the connections between anti-Arab racism, Islamophobia, and US imperial wars in Southwest Asia and North Africa.

### **Teaching Palestine Isn't Antisemitic!**

Attacks on teachers who bring Palestine into their classrooms or advocate for staff development on the history of Palestine and Israel usually take the form of accusations of antisemitism. Zionists argue that any discussion of Palestine or critique of Israel creates an "unsafe climate" for Jewish students.

It's important to be clear:

- Critical pedagogy about Israel's role in Palestine is not antisemitic.
- Antisemitism is discrimination against, violence towards, or stereotypes of Jews for being Jewish. Criticism of Israel's policies of apartheid and oppression of Palestinians is not antisemitism.
- False accusations of antisemitism that rely on the conflation of the State of Israel with Jewish identity are an explicit strategy of Zionists, who portray Palestinians as motivated by antisemitism or irrational hatred rather than resistance to oppression.
- Zionists claim to speak for all Jews, but Zionism is distinct from Judaism. Growing numbers of Jews are critical of Israel's settler colonialism and support teaching Arab-American studies and Palestine.
- Claims that discussion, or even mention, of Palestine makes classrooms "unsafe" for Jewish or Israeli American students are racist, just like claims that discussion of slavery or Jim Crow makes classrooms unsafe for white students. Students are empowered by exploring accurate history, looking beneath rightwing myths to face what's really going on in the world. Recognizing patterns of continuing colonialism and the long history of resistance and resilience is freeing for all of us. That's how our youth will be able to build the relationships and strategies necessary to create a better world.
- Safety comes through solidarity. Antisemitism—like anti-Asian, anti-Black, anti-Palestinian, and Islamophobic attacks and rhetoric—exists in every community, but it is fostered and exploited by rightwing movements in the US and around the world that gain power by keeping us divided.

## Be Strategic!



If you've taught controversial curriculum—LGBTQ history and rights, sex-positive sex ed, prison abolition, US imperialism/militarism, anti-racist resistance, reproductive justice—the issues around planning aren't very different. You want to be a courageous educator, but you also want to be strategic and think long-term. Here are a few factors to consider:

Are there other teachers at school or in your union you can strategize and collaborate with? Even one or two other teachers who will have your back and help you think things through makes an enormous difference.

Think about who you are and the situation you're in. When issues come up, it's not all equal. For example, white privilege provides protection. If you're tenured, you're more protected, especially if you're in a public school and you're in a union. Those factors may give you the ability—and the responsibility—to take more risks to do the right thing.

- Who is in your classroom? If your classroom is a mirror and window, if you're giving students tools that they can see are useful to them—they are going to be your strongest allies, especially in middle and high school. Are there student clubs where progressive students are already organized?

What about parents and other members of the community? If there's a PTA, does it support social justice teaching? Are parents or the local community organized in support of

- progressive causes that will make them likely to support your work? On the other hand, are the JCRC, the ADL, the Jewish Federation and/or other Zionist organizations active and likely to create problems? If so, how can you build support before you begin so you're in a strong position to withstand potential attack?

Is the administration likely to be supportive if you tell them about your plans? Or are you

- better off trying to fly under the radar or growing strong enough as a group to pressure them? You know your situation best, but administrators usually hate controversy, so it's a lot easier for them to say no or institute a process that delays your work forever rather than support you moving forward. On the other hand, if you have grassroots support and are doing teaching that your students love, the administrator can see that they will have problems if they shut you down.

## **Base Strong Curriculum in Strong Pedagogy**

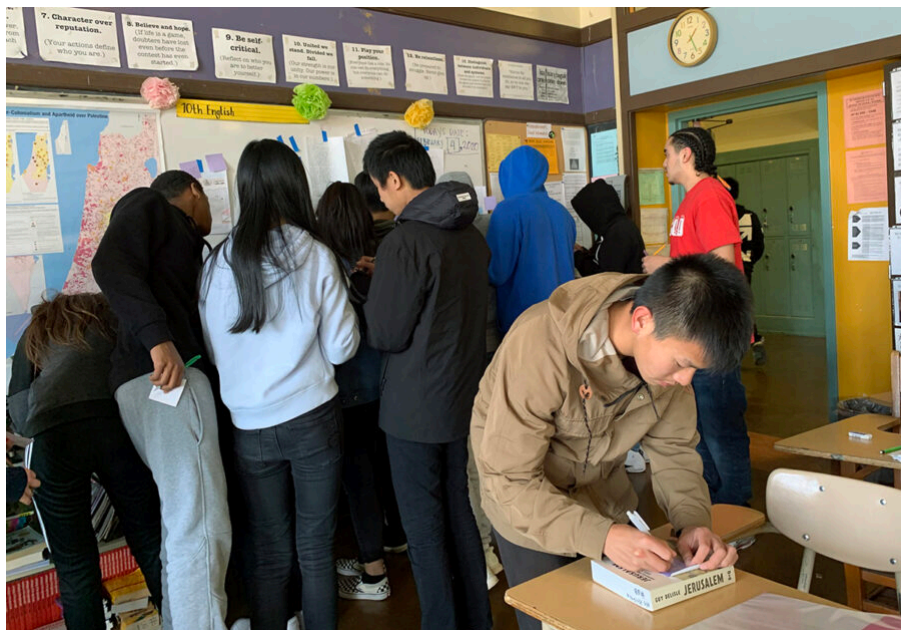
As always with social justice curriculum, start by building community in your classroom. Your students need to know it's safe for them to speak from their hearts, tell their stories, be vulnerable, have feelings, and make mistakes—that your classroom is a nurturing place for opening up and changing.

Think carefully as you create your curriculum. Start with your students' lives. What issues are most resonant for them? How can you connect Palestine? You might want to center gentrification and forced relocation, criminalization of youth, or hip-hop as resistance. Maybe

- you want to take a deep dive into the Native American history in your area and connect that to settler colonialism in Palestine.
- Take advantage of resources and curriculum that already exist. See the resources list at the end of this toolkit.
- Integrate Palestine into your curriculum so it's not a "multicultural add-on" but an illuminating comparison. A few examples: impact of continuing colonial control on water resources at the US/Mexico border and in Gaza, using statistics to look at forced removals in your city and East Jerusalem, impact of ideology comparing Manifest Destiny to the Promised Land, efforts to bury history and the struggles to resurface those histories.

Then, make sure you can justify your curriculum with your state standards.

## Organize Your School! Organize Your Community!



There have always been teachers who shut their doors and teach their students liberatory curriculum. That's an incredibly important contribution to the emotional health of our students and to the struggle for racial and social justice. Many of us trace our own politics back to one of those teachers. Other teachers are interested in organizing on a school-wide, districtwide, statewide or national level.

If you're interested in broader organizing in your educational setting, it will be important to create a support system for this incredibly important collective work. Locate a space to be visible, encourage one another, strategize and be your authentic selves. Make sure you have a site of activism and healing on your school site, in your union and with the community.

Never take on this work alone; make time to meet with others on a regular basis to collectively strategize your plans for education and action. Many unions have racial justice and/or human rights committees already actively engaged in issues like Defunding the Police, Black Lives Matter, Immigrant Rights and other just causes. Connect with these union activists.

You may want to form a Palestinian affinity caucus. Forming a caucus will help in educating union members and passing important initiatives in support of Palestine. However, if the existing racial justice or human rights committee is open to explicit support of Palestine, a separate caucus may not be necessary.

Either way, create a space inside your school and within the union to engage in this critical work. Remember, it is important to educate. Often even your most seasoned activists are not well-versed on the subject of Palestine or prepared for Zionist backlash. Build community, folks.

Inevitably, you will need to engage with activists outside of the union to support, co-sponsor, engage in mutually supportive projects and, also, to help one another negotiate the treacherous waters of white supremacy. The community can help you with resources, pedagogical tools, and help secure people to assist in your endeavors. Community is important, whether you are organizing in your classroom, your school site, in the union, or in the district. Community members engaged in this work are unafraid, experienced, knowledgeable and, the level of solidarity and unity from joining with community members is healing, spirit-uplifting and awesome. Always remember, you are not alone!

## **A Few Resources**

### **Understanding Zionism and Zionist Organizations**

#Drop the ADL. [The ADL Is Not An Ally: A Primer](#). 2021.

Jewish Voice for Peace. [“Our Approach to Zionism.”](#)

Sokolower, Jody. [“Promoting Zionism Is Not ‘Education to End Hate,’”](#) *Mondoweiss*, September 29, 2020.

International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network. [The Business of Backlash: The Attack on the Palestinian Movement and Other Movements for Justice](#). 2015.

[“Jewish Educators Say Yes to Liberatory Ethnic Studies”](#) (webinar)

### **Curriculum Resources**

[Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Institute](#)

Middle East Children’s Alliance. [Teach Palestine Project](#)

[Visualizing Palestine 101](#)

US Campaign for Palestinian Rights. [Together We Rise: Palestine As a Model of Resistance](#).

[“Arab American Studies, Palestine, and the Fight for Ethnic Studies”](#) (webinar)