



Protect Civil Rights for All Students, Oppose S.558

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President and CEO

Maya Wiley

Dear Senator,

On behalf of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, a coalition charged by its diverse membership of more than 240 national organizations to promote and protect the civil and human rights of all persons in the United States, I write with the deepest concern about the unacceptable rise in antisemitism in this country and the need to address that rise effectively.

Make no mistake; antisemitism threatens our communities and our values and has no place here. We know that hate and bias in all its forms, including hate and bias against Black, Latino, Arab American, Asian American, and LGBTQ people, and people with disabilities, as well as other religious groups, including Muslim and Sikh communities, is also on the rise. We have worked across our broad and diverse coalition to combat discrimination, bias, and hate that have been a growing scourge.

At a time of escalating concerns about antisemitism, as well as bigotry against Arab American, Muslim, Black, Latino, Asian American and LGBTQ communities, other forms of racism and xenophobia and bigotry, we must engage in an inclusive approach to protect civil rights and liberties, promote mutual respect, and counter all forms of discrimination, bias, and hate. **The Antisemitism Awareness Act, S.558, does not represent this inclusive approach.**

At a time when we see the administration and others exploit legitimate concerns about antisemitism to undermine democratic norms and rights, this legislation would turn Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, from a protective measure into a weapon that this administration will wield against students. In the name of tackling discrimination, S.558 will instead exacerbate it, providing formal tools to the Trump administration to escalate its abuse of government power against people whose viewpoints and lawful activities it dislikes or deems oppositional to its ideological agenda. We have already witnessed the violation of rights of students and other people in this country, like Mohsen Mahdawi, a green card holder who has lived in Vermont for a decade and was in the formal citizenship process, and Rumeysa Ozturk, a student visa holder. Both were detained by ICE, facing deportation for speaking out for Palestinian human rights. We have witnessed student visa holders who are of Arab national origin or descent or who are Muslim also being targeted for deportation, apparently for their similar free speech activities, and in violation of their due process rights.

Already, the Trump administration, under the umbrella of Executive Order 14188, *Additional Measures to Combat Anti-Semitism*, is exploiting real fears about antisemitism to cancel billions of dollars in government grants and contracts to universities, to limit First Amendment protected speech on college campuses, to censor curriculum, and to arrest, detain, and deport foreign students. Congress should not adopt any definition of discrimination for a single protected group—to drive a wedge between groups and to use that

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wedge to take away civil and constitutional rights—allowing hate to flourish. **We urge you to reject the Antisemitism Awareness Act, S.558**, when the measure comes before you.

Importantly, the Antisemitism Awareness Act, S.558, will do nothing to address antisemitism or undo the ways in which the Trump administration has undermined civil rights enforcement. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 has rightly been interpreted for many years to prohibit discrimination on the basis of shared ancestry and ethnic characteristics.¹ The Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) under both Democratic and Republican Administrations has been clear that discrimination against students who are or are perceived to be Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, or of another religious group could violate Title VI.² OCR's work to prevent and respond to antisemitism and all forms of discrimination is irreplaceable. However, the Antisemitism Awareness Act, S.558, does not do anything to enable or support the critical work of OCR; it does not provide additional funding, reverse the devastating 50 percent cut to OCR staffing, or reopen regional offices shuttered under this administration.³ These OCR cuts undermine any claim that the Trump administration takes discrimination, hate, and bias seriously and shows that it views civil rights enforcement only as a tool to advance its own political agenda. Congress should not endorse such efforts.

All students deserve to be safe and welcomed on campus, to have free speech rights, civil rights protections and the freedom to live and learn without fear of retribution from the federal government. Weaponizing Title VI of the Civil Rights Act is not the right approach to course-correcting growing hate and bias, and in fact, will have the opposite effect. We need comprehensive efforts to address discrimination in all its forms, well-funded and fully staffed civil rights enforcement committed to meaningfully enforcing the federal law, respect for the Constitution in all corners, and welcoming campus environments where all students can thrive.

We strongly urge you to reject S.558, the Antisemitism Awareness Act-- and any other legislation that would codify an antisemitism definition—and pursue inclusive strategies to protect students from antisemitism and other forms of hate. We strongly urge you to turn your attention to the very real harms underway from the Trump Administration that embolden discrimination, deny educational opportunity, and undermine democracy.

Sincerely,



Maya Wiley
President & CEO

¹ Title VI and Coverage of Religiously Identifiable Groups. Letter from Assistant Attorney General Tom Perez to Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights Russlynn Ali. September 8, 2010. https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/crt/legacy/2011/05/04/090810_AAG_Perez_Letter_to_Ed_OCR_Title%20VI_and_Religiously_Identifiable_Groups.pdf

² See "Know Your Rights: Title VI and Religion". U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. 2017. <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/know-rights-201701-religious-disc.pdf>, and "Fact Sheet: Protecting students from Discrimination Based on Shared Ancestry or Ethnic Characteristics". U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. January 2023. <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/ocr-factsheet-shared-ancestry-202301.pdf>

³ Modan, Naaz. "Half of OCR eliminated after Trump Education Department layoffs." *K-12 Dive*. March 12, 2025. <https://www.k12dive.com/news/half-of-ocr-fired-after-trump-education-department-layoffs/742374/>