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May 3, 2024

Chairman Bean and Ranking Member Bonamici
U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce
2176 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Bean and Ranking Member Bonamici,

Teaching our youngest learners to hear others' opinions with kind respect is a fundamental call to action in our public schools and in service to our democracy.

As you prepare to interview Ms. Enikia Ford Morthel, Superintendent of the Berkeley Unified School District in California and a leader in one of our state's one thousand public school districts, I implore you to consider the questions and concerns that the world and national events bring into our schools. I urge you to consider the profound challenges that our education professionals face as they strive to balance students' needs to share opinions and concerns and the need to keep schools safe for all students.

Issues as complex as those connected to Israel and Gaza have deep historical roots often resulting in deeply divided opinions. Given that divisions and differing opinions exist between our most learned scholars, religious leaders, and political leaders, it makes sense that there are differences within the families that our Kindergarten – 12th-grade students' school districts serve.

Our education professionals are continuously working to balance the need for students to be heard, and to share their free speech rights while maintaining a safe environment for all to learn. Our educators work hard to support our students every day. Through their work, they can inspire the younger generation to become teachers and educators.

Local Voice -- Hearing and integrating the local values and voice of a school community is a bedrock principle in public education. State and Federal Departments of Education may set academic standards, and state legislatures may write laws that impact how we do our work, it is the local voice that shapes the culture of every district.

Please consider that Superintendent Ford-Morthel represents a district with a proud history of free speech and student activism. She is embracing and engaging her community, which is her legal and moral obligation.

Silence is Not Inaction -- You no doubt hear from constituents that “nothing is being done” to address concerns when in fact there are strict laws protect employees and student privacy rights; therefore, little if any detail can be offered to members of the public to articulate precisely what discipline may be levied on employees or students following a proper investigation. You can help this situation by clarifying that a lack of specific detail regarding discipline is not inaction, it is the law.

Support Our Work, Support Office for Civil Rights -- Our members recognize the critical role of OCR and we hope that you will support recommendations to fully fund this division within the US Department of Education so that they may continue their important work in a timely and responsive manner enabling a quicker resolution to the issues raised. This is in the best interest of the 6 million students served in California’s public schools and by the school administrators whom I serve.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Edgar Zazueta', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dr. Edgar Zazueta
ACSA Executive Director

CC:

The Honorable Bobby Scott
The Honorable Virginia Fox
Members of the Subcommittee

From: [REDACTED] (Berkeley PTA Council Secretary) <secretary@berkeleypta.org>

Date: Wed, May 1, 2024 at 9:39 PM

Subject: May 1 School Board - BPTA Council Report

To: jasminaviteskic@berkeley.net <jasminaviteskic@berkeley.net>

Cc: [REDACTED] <president@berkeleypta.org>, Council Treasurer <treasurer@berkeleypta.org>

BPTA Council Report to School Board May 1, 2024

Good Evening Superintendent and School Board Members,

I am [REDACTED] and this is [REDACTED], two members of the Berkeley PTA Council Executive Leadership Team. This is the first time this year BPTA Council has come to report out at a school board meeting. We are here to highlight some of the issues we as a collective PTA have been discussing and working on.

Support for Superintendent

We would like to begin our report by acknowledging that Superintendent Ford Morthel has been asked by the United States Congress to testify about the impact on our community of events that have occupied the national news lately. In the current national political environment, we believe this poses a challenge not only to our Superintendent, but also to our community as a whole, from the unpredictable press and social media repercussions of her testimony. Our school district has so much going for it, and much ongoing work to continue improving for all our students. We call on our community to come together in support as she leaves for Washington, and more importantly, unified and strong after she returns.

BUSD's enduring commitment that all schools welcome and work for all students and their families, under renewed leadership of our Superintendent, is in keeping with the National PTA's mission to make every child's potential a reality.

From: BUSD AAPI Organizers <busdaapi@gmail.com>

Date: Wed, May 1, 2024 at 9:25 PM

Subject: May 1 School Board - Public Comment from BUSD AAPI

To: jasminaviteskic@berkeley.net <jasminaviteskic@berkeley.net>

Good evening Superintendent and School Board Members,

I am [REDACTED] and I am here representing BUSD AAPI, a group of community organizers representing parents, caretakers, teachers and BUSD staff. We are here today to voice our support for our Superintendent as she prepares to testify in a congressional hearing next week.

Our group was established in 2021 to address rising xenophobia and racism in BUSD - our mission is to advocate for the ongoing visibility and celebration of the voices, cultures, curriculums and histories of Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders and the diaspora.

Our group works in solidarity with others who share our commitment to cultivate an inclusive, anti-racist learning environment for everyone in the BUSD community. In our time working with Superintendent Ford Morthel, we have found her to be a champion for many communities (not just ours) that have historically been marginalized. Our Superintendent supports our vision that every AAPI child leaves BUSD with a rooted sense of self that has been intentionally nurtured and affirmed - and we know that her work extends to supporting not just AAPI children, but all children in our district

Superintendent, we thank you for your leadership. Know that we, BUSD AAPI wish you well, give you strength to stand up for what we know is right for our babies, and we have faith that you will make BUSD proud. We, BUSD AAPI stand in solidarity with you.

From: [REDACTED] >

Date: May 6, 2024 at 11:20:22 PM EDT

To: enikiafordmorthel@berkeley.net

Subject: Thank you for your service to our community

Dear Ms. Ford-Morthel,

As a longtime Berkeley resident, I feel a deep connection to my community--especially its public school system and the gifted and hardworking educators and administrators that have made it a national model in regard to its academic rigor and innovative DEI-focused curricula. I was so happy and proud when you were selected to be our superintendent, and have since received many glowing accounts (from teacher friends) of your leadership skills and commitment to the well-being of all of our young people. When I learned that you have been caught up in the Congressional hearings on anti-semitism in K-12 education, I was horrified. Please know that I, along with thousands of other Berkeley residents, and students are squarely in your corner and applaud your courage in resisting those who use our children to advance their political ambitions.

Thank you for your service to our community,

[REDACTED]

Professor of History

[REDACTED]

----- Forwarded message -----

From: [REDACTED]

Date: Mon, May 6, 2024, 9:57 AM

Subject: Gratitude

To: Enikia Ford Morthel <EnikiaFordMorthel@berkeley.net>

Hi Enikia,

I have been thinking a lot about your upcoming date with Congress, I bet you have too.

I have so much gratitude for your willingness to listen and stretch and learn and support, all for the sake of making lives better for young people.

Your positive attitude and open heart are the critical elements that we need in educators in this very challenging time. You set a solid example, thank you.

I will be sending you positive energy on Wednesday, you got this!

Thank you so much for really caring and listening!

[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED] >

Date: Sun, May 5, 2024 at 12:54 AM

Subject: Letter of support and encouragement

To: <superintendent@berkeley.net>

Dear Superintendent Ford Morthel

I am writing to extend my support to you as you prepare for your trip to DC.

I want to express my deep and sincere gratitude for your leadership in Berkeley Unified, as well as my immense pride to work in a district led by a revolutionary, intelligent and empathetic individual like yourself. I'm still in awe of your powerful and revolutionary vision for this district, the projects that have already begun to achieve radical goals for our most underserved students, and of your ability to remain composed and empathetic in the face of so much hate and vitriol.

I want you to know that no matter what happens on Wednesday, I have your back and will do what I can in my capacity to defend you. There is a large community in Berkeley who supports you and wants you to serve as this district's leader for a long time. Many parents, teachers and students feel so much warmth and love for you! You are what this district needs, now and for the long-haul.

I also want to say that I hope you will remember that these hearings are not legitimate. These hearings are intended to scare you and to scare every educational leader in the country into submission and silence. But you are incredibly courageous and strong. I have no doubt that you are the right person to be the head of this district at a time like this, and I believe that you and this district will come out of this hardship stronger than before.

I am wishing you so much love, strength and courage.

Long live international solidarity.

PS: A very cool teacher/parent in BUSD made this poster of you (attached), I'm sharing because I hope it'll lift your spirits!

[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]

Date: Mon, Apr 15, 2024 at 2:19 PM

Subject: Re: Superintendent Ford Morthel to Testify in Washington, DC

To: <superintendent@berkeley.net>

Cc: School Board <boardofed@berkeley.net>, Public Information Office <pio@berkeley.net>

Dear Superintendent,

I am so proud you are leading our district and am so grateful for your expertise, attention, and care to give our kids a safe place to learn. I want you to know I support you and appreciate you so much. Thank you for supporting our community and our kids.

in solidarity,

[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]

Date: Mon, Apr 15, 2024 at 2:25 PM

Subject: Re: [REDACTED] Superintendent Ford Morthel to Testify in Washington, DC on May 8

To: Enikia Ford Morthel <enikiafordmorthel@berkeley.net>

Dear Enikia,

Just so you know, many educators [REDACTED] and in circles that I am familiar with are sending you our very best as you go to testify at Congress. We feel well-represented and assured that you will meet that challenge with grace and dignity. We have never had a superintendent that "got it" like you do. Thanks for your steady hand as you guide our district through these tumultuous times.

Sending you much love and respect,

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] History, [REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]

Date: Mon, Apr 15, 2024 at 5:25 PM

Subject: Thank you for taking a stand to teach our children about Israel and Palestine

To: <superintendent@berkeley.net>

I can only imagine how difficult the last few months have been, especially as you take a stand to teach our children about Israel and Palestine.

Our son, [REDACTED] is at BHS, and we feel deep appreciation for the integrity you bring to educating our children. I've been to multiple school board meetings to show my support and will continue to do so.

Thank you for your bravery, and I hope your visit to congress goes smoothly.

With deep gratitude,

[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]
Date: Mon, Apr 15, 2024 at 5:39 PM
Subject: Thank you Superintendent!
To: <superintendent@berkeley.net>

Dear Superintendent Ford Mothel-

I'm writing to say thank you for your advocacy for ALL Berkeley's students, and your continued commitment to education as social justice in action.

I'm a second generation graduate of Berkeley schools, an educator, a Berkeley resident, and a Jewish woman of color who is so proud to say our schools are led by you! It's appalling but not surprising to know that Congress is misusing its power and resources to demand you and BUSD answer for standing on the right side of history.

Please know that there are many anti-Zionist Jews like myself who stand beside you, and that we know our liberation is deeply linked with the liberation of Palestine. Thank you for fighting for all the diverse students and families in BUSD's care.

With deep appreciation,

[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]

Date: Mon, Apr 15, 2024 at 5:53 PM

Subject: Expressing support on your Congressional Hearing in Washington DC

To: <superintendent@berkeley.net>

Dear Ms. Ford Morthel

I want to thank you for your work as Superintendent.

I trust the way you represent our School District. As a parent, I know it is not perfect but still wonderful, committed to the holistic education of our children, relentlessly evolving to lead change towards improvement. I witness the work and want to support it. There is no reason for these attacks on our community.

Looking forward to standing by your side in the hearing.

[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]
Date: Mon, Apr 15, 2024 at 6:42 PM
Subject: Gratitude
To: <superintendent@berkeley.net>

Thank you for going to DC to stand strong against the divisiveness some are perpetuating. As a parent of two children at BUSD and involved in the BUSD community for over 8 years, I believe the BUSD's approach to education that calls for critical thinking, free thought, open discussions while maintaining respect and caring for everyone is a model of how our society should be. If we trained more students as we do at BUSD, I think the world would be a better, less divisive place. It is very sad that the influence of a very small subset of a marginalized community is trying to hold our model for education hostage. My [REDACTED] grade daughter longs to be able to discuss everything that is happening in the world, including in Gaza. As she said to me: "BLM was right: silence is violence because it doesn't feel good to be unable to talk freely." I grew up in [REDACTED] [REDACTED] and had similar limitations about "controversial" topics; I just never thought my American children would experience the same.

Again, thank you for being courageous and representing BUSD and its students (like my daughters) in DC.

In solidarity,
[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]
Date: Mon, Apr 15, 2024 at 7:50 PM
Subject: Gratitude and encouragement
To: <superintendent@berkeley.net>

Dear Superintendent Ford Morthel,

I just want to let you know how much I appreciate your courage and integrity. I admire the way in which you always manage to carry these qualities with so much love and kindness.

Thank you for always doing your best for "our babies", and for reminding us that BUSD students are ALL "our babies."

This Jewish mom wants to remind you that there is no antisemitism coming from BUSD, the teachers, staff or the curriculum. There's only love, curiosity and a desire to learn about the world in order to build a better one--one where every child can enjoy a sense of safety and belonging.

With gratitude,

[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]

Date: Mon, Apr 15, 2024 at 8:32 PM

Subject: Thank you!

To: <superintendent@berkeley.net>

Thank you, Superintendent Ford Morthel for your courage and leadership in this moment. We stand with you!!

If there's anything tangible our community can do to support you, please let us know.

Warm regards,

[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]

Date: Mon, Apr 15, 2024 at 9:07 PM

Subject: your D.C. trip

To: Superintendent Ford Morthel <superintendent@berkeley.net>

Dear Superintendent Ford Morthel,

I am writing in support of your courageous acceptance of the invitation to appear before Congress. I wish you all the best as you step into the lion's den to defend free and fair education, and stand against censorship. I know you will make us all proud as you defend Berkeley against the forces that view an honest representation of our (and Israel's) past as a threat to the entrenched powers that be. Please know that I and many other Berkeleyans stand behind you as you defend the value of unbiased education, an education that respects our students' rights and values our students' capacity for critical thinking, without censorship or propaganda.

Wishing you all the best,

[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]
Date: Mon, Apr 15, 2024 at 10:05 PM
Subject: Thank you!
To: Superintendent Office <superintendent@berkeley.net>

Dear Superintendent Ford Morthel,

I just wanted to add my voice to the chorus of those who appreciate and thank you for your courageous and compassionate leadership throughout this debacle. Your ability to take parent concerns seriously while still believing in the capacity of teachers and students to take on difficult and complicated subject matter is testament to your belief in valuing all voices and wanting the best for "our babies."

Thank you again and again for your inspiring leadership!

--

[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED] >

Date: Mon, Apr 15, 2024 at 11:03 PM

Subject: Sending love and strength your way

To: <superintendent@berkeley.net>

Dear Superintendent,

You have been such an amazing leader for our district these past several months. Thank you so much for standing up for all of our kids, teachers, and community members in this district. I am sending you all love and support as you head off to Washington. I'm sorry this is happening, but please know you are NOT alone. We believe in you and stand by you!

With care,

[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]
Date: Tue, Apr 16, 2024 at 9:01 AM
Subject: Thank you from a BUSD teacher!
To: Enikia Ford Morthel <enikiafordmorthel@berkeley.net>, Superintendent Office
<superintendent@berkeley.net>

Hello Superintendent Ford Morthel,

My name is [REDACTED] and I am [REDACTED] teacher at [REDACTED]. I wanted to write to voice my gratitude for the care and intention you've brought to the conversations around Palestine in the district, and your continued commitment to students' needs and teachers' well-being. I've been to every board meeting since Winter Break in support of the Liberated Ethnic Studies Curriculum, but have consistently stayed at the meetings as late as possible to celebrate and witness the other ways that you and the board are centering and supporting Berkeley staff and students beyond the cross hairs of this important but contentious issue. In particular, I am really excited about the work the district is doing to improve T1 and 2 literacy instruction to make it more accessible for folks with diverse learning needs!

As a Jew, [REDACTED], I'm deeply committed to the work that is needed to protect individuals at the margins of social norms, and admire and appreciate that you bring that same commitment to all conversations, but particularly the conversations around LES and Palestine.

I hope that in your upcoming trip to DC, you are able to hold the gratitude from your community for your continued advocacy. I also need to state that, frankly, many, many, many Jews like myself in this community see and celebrate BUSD's LES curriculum, and do not hold the louder belief that it is somehow antisemitic. I feel some shame around the way that some Jewish voices are weaponizing antisemitism as a tool to silence conversations of oppression, and spoken for by our curriculum which insists on high expectations of and for all people.

Again thank you, and I hope you are able to find some rest in these last few weeks of the school year!

Best,

[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]
Date: Tue, Apr 16, 2024 at 1:36 PM
Subject: Thank you for standing up for for truth in education
To: <superintendent@berkeley.net>

Dear Superintendent Ford Morthel,

I would like to express my gratitude for your unwavering support of the right of our students to engage in free discourse on topics which have been under attack for the sake of advancing a particular political agenda.

It's a disgrace that the Congress has summoned you to Capitol Hill to respond to baseless allegations. We must challenge the conflation of criticism of Israel, anti-Zionism, and a call for the end to the Occupation with antisemitism and not fall into the trap that has cost two university presidents their careers.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Berkeley resident

From: [REDACTED]

Date: Tue, Apr 16, 2024 at 9:59 PM

Subject: Thank you for standing strong.

To: <superintendent@berkeley.net>

Dear Superintendent Morthel,

As a POC parent raising my children in BUSD (BHS and Willard by way of Emerson), I couldn't be more proud and encouraged by your leadership in this difficult time. Thinking and leading with head and heart above the fray to center all of our students. Please know families are with you on your journey to DC. I'm calling on my interfaith folks to center the work you do in their thoughts, meditations, and prayers as will I.

Be well and know you are supported,

[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]
Date: Wed, Apr 17, 2024 at 10:03 PM
Subject: Trip to Washington
To: <superintendent@berkeley.net>

Ms Ford Morthel,

Thank you for going to this congressional hearing. They will be lucky to get a dose of the integrity and diplomacy you bring to community discourse. This hearing will not expose anti semitism in our BUSD schools it will however expose this insidious lawsuit for what it is, a shallow narrative picked up by a litigious organization that has the money and power to harass our school, what a sham, have they no sense of decency! They have the money but they don't have the numbers. We can't all come support you, but we'll be there in spirit, and you have all you need, the truth. Tell them what our community already knows which is that our Jewish students, like all our students, are supported at school. The cries for a free Palestine have reached a tipping point and If a student feels uncomfortable seeing Israeli policy being criticized they probably haven't seen what Israeli policy means to a Palestinian. Ms Ford Morthel please tell Washington this lawsuit belongs in the dustbin of history.

Sincerely and with much respect,

[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]

Date: Fri, Apr 19, 2024 at 7:37 PM

Subject: Thank You

To: <superintendent@berkeley.net>

Cc: [REDACTED]

Dear Superintendent Morthel,

My name is [REDACTED] and I am an alumni of BUSD (C/O 1988.) I have a large Berkeley extended family who have also all attended BUSD; including my brother and 3 sisters, my two sons, and 9 nieces and nephews. We are all throughout BUSD, and multi-generational. My mother was a kindergarten teacher for many years at both Sylvia Mendez and Malcolm X, and my sister was a librarian at BHS for many years, until last year when she went to be a librarian at [REDACTED]

We are a family active in local (and global) politics with many decades of work in the Berkeley community.

We are a multi racial family, and we are Jewish. My brother in law is [REDACTED], who I think you know through his work as the co-chair of the [REDACTED].

I have been an educator in [REDACTED] for 29 years and counting. I am in my 18th year as an administrator in [REDACTED].

My parents and I have attended the last 4 school board meetings (and many others off and on throughout the years.)

I want to say how disappointed I am in the recent lawsuits against the district. I do not believe those lawsuits represent a majority of the people in Berkeley. It has been powerful and uplifting to see the Jewish parents and community so visibly and overwhelmingly support the Liberated Ethnic Studies program. We seem to have a small minority of Jewish people making a lot of political noise. I am hopeful that you can see that.

I hope you will not be discouraged. I know your job is very challenging, and this situation only makes it more difficult. I want you to feel our support and know we are with you as you uphold and maintain progressive movement in Berkeley. Being bold with our support of students of color and all marginalized students is crucial in this moment (and all moments.) With everything going on around the country (firing of professors, closing down DEI departments, censorship of history curriculums, banning books, canceling valedictorian speeches, etc.) **we must stay**

steadfast in our anti racism work and in the work of telling the truth about hard history, as well as current events.

As Jewish people, we have diverse views, and as you can see from the recent school board meetings, many of us stand against zionism and colonialism, while maintaining our Jewish identity.

I just want you to know that you have a lot of support (as you are called to Washington DC.) We see you joining with the voices of the Justice Seekers who have been called to testify before such committees throughout history. It is not lost on us that they are calling primarily women of color as they target our work to tell the truth.

Many of us stay here in Berkeley because of the belief, the hope, and the promise of a special and different kind of community. My parents and their generation worked tirelessly (and are still working) to create a different kind of city. Berkeley isn't and never has been perfect (and maybe it was never as good as I thought it was as a child.) But we are here, still trying to build and maintain that special community. We are targeted by those outside our community (who link up with a few within our community) because they know we are progressive thinkers and movement shapers.

As an educator and community member, I just wanted to reach out and share my support for you, and my support for telling the truth to our children. We must tell and teach the truth even, maybe especially, when it is difficult and possibly uncomfortable (in a developmentally appropriate way!) The Berkeley teachers, as you know, are overwhelmingly fantastic. They know how to do this.

Thank you for reading my long email. Stay encouraged, and we have your back!

Respectfully,

