October 7, 2026

Via Email

Dr. Howard Lerner
Superintendent
Bergen County Technical Schools
504 Rt. 46 West
Teterboro, New Jersey 07608

Re: Removal of Classroom Materials and Viewpoint-Selective Restrictions on Classroom Expression

Dear Dr. Lerner:

I write on behalf of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, New Jersey Chapter (CAIR-NJ), the largest Muslim civil rights organization in the state. We have been in contact with Daniel Gosselink, a tenured social studies teacher at Bergen County Technical High School. CAIR-NJ is deeply troubled by the Bergen County School District's removal of a small **"Gaza Must Live"** sign from his classroom on September 11, 2026, and by what appears to be a building-level pre-clearance requirement concerning classroom materials about one subject alone: Palestine.

As you know, the sign at issue is a single 8.5-by-11-inch sheet of paper that reads: **"Gaza Must Live."** It hung in Room 519 alongside other current-events materials, including a sign reading "ICE Out of Our Schools and Communities." Elsewhere in the building, classroom doors and windows display "I Stand With Immigrants" and "Stand With Ukraine" stickers, and at least one classroom displays a Black Lives Matter flag. **"Gaza Must Live"** affirms the humanity of a people and their right to live, nothing more and nothing less. Prior to the September removal of the sign, District Administrators regularly observed his classroom while the sign was displayed and never suggested that it violated any policy.

This changed shortly after Back-to-School Night on September 11, 2026, when a parent contacted Congressman Josh Gottheimer's office to complain about the sign. Based on emails our office reviewed, the Congressman's office then demanded that you remove the display, and the District complied within hours. **No policy violation was identified, no investigation was undertaken, and Mr. Gosselink was afforded no opportunity to respond before his sign was removed.** Particularly troubling is the dangerous precedent this creates: that a sitting member of Congress can dictate what a tenured teacher may display in his classroom. When a single phone call through a congressional office can result in the removal of classroom material, every teacher in the District learns that their expression is secure only until someone with political influence objects. Public schools must be governed by their own policies and independent educational judgment, not by the whims of politicians far removed from the day-to-day realities of the school, its students, teachers, and culture.

Mr. Gosselink is a well-respected educator who is committed to educating his students

about global affairs and the profound impact it can have on their lives. He is dedicated to fostering critical thinking and appreciation for the principles of social justice and advocacy among his students. It is difficult to imagine, then, a more troubling lesson for students to take from this unfortunate sequence of events: that advocating for the lives, rights, and dignity of the people of Gaza and Palestine may subject them to censorship, heightened scrutiny, or silence.

The District's subsequent actions only deepened those concerns by singling out speech relating to Palestine and Gaza for heightened scrutiny, requiring Mr. Gosselink to seek approval for such materials and prohibiting even a poster bearing only the word "Gaza." Against that backdrop, the removal of the "Gaza Must Live" sign strongly suggests that the District was not applying a neutral policy but instead targeting expression that conveyed support for the lives, rights, and humanity of Palestinians.

The District cannot selectively subject one topic (and one perspective) to heightened restrictions while permitting comparable expression on other current events. A directive that extends so far as to prohibit even the word "Gaza," is not a neutral rule governing classroom displays. Rather, it suggests that expression relating to Palestine is being treated differently from comparable political, humanitarian, and social-justice expression. That disparate treatment raises serious concerns of content- and viewpoint-based discrimination that are difficult to reconcile with the First Amendment and the Equal Protection Clause.

Mr. Gosselink's classroom has long been a place where Muslim, Palestinian, Middle Eastern, and other students who often feel unseen or unheard, can openly talk about their experiences and identities in a safe space. For students who encounter bias and stereotypes every day, that is no small thing. It is also critical to note that no student has complained about the sign. Mr. Gosselink's classroom, and the many messages displayed within it, create a supportive environment for all students.

In the spirit of resolving this constructively, we respectfully ask that the District take the following steps:

1. Permit Mr. Gosselink to restore the "Gaza Must Live" sign to his classroom and confirm in writing that he may display it.
2. Identify in writing the specific Board policy, if any, on which the removal and any display standard rest.
3. Confirm that decisions regarding classroom displays will be made pursuant to District policy and educational judgment, rather than external political pressure.
4. Meet with us to discuss these concerns and to ensure consistent, non-discriminatory treatment going forward.

Mr. Gosselink cares deeply about this school and its students, and he wants them to be able to engage honestly with difficult subjects. We share the District's interest in a school where every student feels welcome, and we believe that goal is best served by consistent standards applied without regard to who is calling. We look forward to your prompt response and remain available as a resource to you and your District.

Sincerely,

Naureen Akhter
Public Affairs Director, CAIR-NJ

Encl.

cc: Andrew Sheridan, Assistant Superintendent, Bergen County Technical Schools — Via-Email

David J. Tankard, Principal, Bergen County Technical High School — Via-Email

William Connelly, President, Bergen County Technical School Board of Education — Via-Email