

Furries

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WHY DO STUDENTS WEAR ANIMAL ACCESSORIES?

It's unclear why exactly students may choose to wear animal accessories, or in some cases, behave like animals. It's also unclear if students who do consider themselves "furries."

But whether "furries" are in Utah schools or not, the subculture is real. The United Utah Furry Fandom, a furry community based in Salt Lake City, compares the fandom to cosplay — the practice of dressing up as a character from a movie, book, or video game, typically done at conventions or events.

"The only difference is furries enjoy embodying characters that look and act like anthropomorphic animals," the Utah Furry Fandom website states. "However, most of the time, the characters represented within the Furry Fandom are original creations."

The website goes on to say that most furries dress up as animals for "performance art."

"Unlike what politicians and the media might say, most furries do not believe that they are animals or that they identify as animals," the website states.

Horsley said he can recall one instance in which a Granite School District student did consider himself a "furry," but there had been no "scratching or biting" to speak of.

At the state level, USBE has received a total of two complaints through its public education hotline concerning "furries" in public schools. Both were received in mid-April and pertained to Mt. Nebo Middle School.

"We are not aware of any other concerns regarding 'furries,'" said USBE communications coordinator Kelsey James.

In response to those complaints, USBE officials said Superintendent Sydnee Dickerson and some board members "reached out to school and district leadership to gather information about the situation, and to better ascertain what actions and investigations were taking place."

Antisemitism accusations against staff pose dilemma for school leaders

By TROY CLOSSON

The New York Times

Throughout a series of congressional hearings about what public schools and universities are doing to combat antisemitism, Republicans keep hammering school leaders on one question.

Why haven't they fired educators accused of antisemitism?

The accusations have come during a wave of demonstrations and discussions about the Israel-Hamas war on the campuses of public schools and universities. The Republicans leading the hearings have argued that school administrators have not done enough to discipline employees whose behavior they say has crossed from protected free speech into antisemitic hate speech and harassment.

But even defining what acts of activities and speech are antisemitic is also hotly debated, including among Jewish families and organizations.

School leaders have had a variety of responses. Some have promised to crack down on individuals, by name, while others have refused to provide any information about employee discipline.

At one of the hearings at the Capitol this month, the New York City schools chief repeatedly leaned on one legal phrase: due process.

"We do not have the authority — just because I disagree — to terminate someone," said the chancellor, David Banks. "That's not the way it works in our school system."

The different approaches by public school and college administrators, both to congressional questioning and to the discipline itself, are a reflection of how discipline has become one of the thorniest challenges for schools trying to navigate tensions over the Israel-Hamas war.

As complaints rack up over teachers who promote protests or professors who spar with students online, leaders have been thrust into a deeply charged issue touching on a complex web of concerns. Among them are gray areas of free speech rules, employees' union rights and heated debates over contested phrases like "from the river to the sea."

To some Jewish students and



AMANDA ANDRADE RHOADES / The New York Times

U.S. Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., holds a printout of a post from a New York City teacher during a House subcommittee hearing questioning school district leaders on antisemitism in schools.

parents, administrators are not doing enough to reprimand or even get rid of employees who they say are allowing hostile views toward Jews to fester in classrooms and lecture halls. Yet to some Arab and Muslim families, many leaders have gone too far, infringing on educators' rights and unevenly enforcing the rules about what warrants discipline.

The tension over discipline is likely to reemerge on the national stage later this month, when the presidents of three more universities, Rutgers, Northwestern and UCLA, become the next to testify in Washington.

When asked by Republicans about individual professors at a hearing last month, Columbia University's president, Minouche Shafik, divulged that two were under investigation for making "discriminatory remarks."

One of them, who described the Hamas-led attack on Israel as a "resistance offensive" in an article, would never work at the school again, she said.

Nine days later, the university's senate accused the administration of having breached professors' due process rights and their privacy.

"These actions show little respect for clearly established protocols," read a resolution approved by the senate.

The Columbia leader's approach

before Congress stood in stark contrast to the testimony of public school leaders at a separate hearing. Uie Berkeley Unified School District superintendent, Enikia Ford Morrell, repeatedly declined to share even broad details of punitive measures taken against district employees, noting that California has strict confidentiality rules that govern personnel details.

The contrasting playbooks were in part a reflection of the chasm between the legal and professional standards for public school districts and higher education institutions. While most professors are granted broad rights to academic freedom, school teachers are far more constrained in their choice of lessons, as well as in their speech as public employees.

Some episodes have centered on clearer cases of explicit hate speech or antisemitic tropes. But many revolve around more nuanced situations, such as how teachers have discussed the war in history and social studies courses, or how their political behavior — such as helping to organize a walkout to call for a cease-fire in the Gaza Strip — may influence students' views.

In Berkeley, for example, the Brandeis Center, a Jewish civil rights group, filed a complaint earlier this year, arguing in part that the district

had "refused" to discipline teachers, including some who framed the Hamas attack as "resistance" or called Israel an "apartheid state" in their classrooms.

Rachel Lerman, the center's vice chair and general counsel, said that many Jewish families feel like if another group were to face similar targeting in schools, "we would see results."

"It's not about silencing speech," Lerman said. "It's about what's appropriate in the classroom under the school's own rules and California's own laws."

A confrontation over similar issues unfolded last week when Republicans questioned Banks over why he had reassigned, but not fired, the principal of a high school where students mockingly protested a Jewish educator who posted support for Israel on social media.

Banks repeated that every school employee is entitled to due process. In a strong union town like New York, most teachers and principals are entitled to hearings where they can respond to accusations of misconduct before officials impose discipline, including firing them.

On an issue as sensitive as the Israel-Hamas war, it may be no surprise that some families "may not ever feel the sanction was appropriate," said Cheryl Logan, a former superintendent in Omaha, Nebraska, and an expert in educational leadership.

District leaders, though, must strike a delicate balance. "People have private lives," she said, "and they work in public schools."

Some states like Massachusetts broadly restrict all public employees from political behavior during work time. A teacher would not be allowed to print pamphlets for a pro-Palestinian demonstration on a school computer, for example, or seek to advance pro-Israel views during class time.

Still, experts said the rules can be murky for a teacher's speech online or out of school hours. Many districts have also previously given educators leeway to show support for certain political or social causes, like Black Lives Matter or Ukraine in its war with Russia.

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