



Internal Investigation Report

Anthony Downer

1. Report Information

- **Date of Report:** November 7, 2024
- **Investigator(s) Name:** Chief Adena Walker and Dr. Monica Batiste
- **Report Prepared By:** Dr. Monica Batiste and Chief Adena Walker

2. Incident Overview

- **Incident/Reported Date:** October 7, 2024; Reported DHS administrators on October 9, 2024.
- **Reported By:** Ben Kaplan, DHS Teacher
- **Method of Reporting:** Shared with Dr. Sprull, DHS Principal

3. Parties Involved

- **Subject(s):**
 - **Name:** Anthony Downer
 - **Role/Position:** DHS/One Goal Teacher
- **Witness(es):**
 - **Name:** Ben Kaplan
 - **Role/Position:** Social Studies Teacher
 - **Contact Information:** benjamin.kaplan@csdecatur.net
 - **Name:** Dr. Duane Sprull
 - **Role/Position:** DHS Principal
 - **Contact Information:** dsprull@csdecatur.net
 - **Name:** [REDACTED]
 - **Role/Position:** [REDACTED] student
 - **Contact Information:** N/A
 - **Name:** Dr. Mari A. Banks
 - **Role/Position:** Director of Equity and PL Director

- **Contact Information:** mbanks@csdecatur.net
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4. Description of the Incident

What Happened: Allegations that Mr. Downer encouraged a student to wear the Keffiyeh on the anniversary of October 7th, a significant event in the Israel-Gaza conflict.

The following alleged violations were investigated:

- Encouraged a student to wear the Keffiyeh on the anniversary of October 7th, a significant event in the Israel-Gaza conflict.
- CSD Dress Code - Nothing that distracts from the learning or professional environment
- Code of Ethics (Standard 9 - Professional Conduct)
- Lack of Professional Judgment as an educator in a public school system

Mr. Downer was placed on paid administrative duty, on Friday, October 11th, upon the receipt of allegations he encouraged students to wear the keffiyeh on the anniversary of October 7th.

When It Happened: The incident occurred on October 7, 2024.

Where It Happened: Decatur High School

5. Evidence Collected

The following evidence was collected regarding the complaint regarding Mr. Downer on October 7, 2024.

- Statement from Anthony Downer - Respondent
- Statement from Ben Kaplan - DHS Teacher - Complainant
- Statement from Dr. Duane Sprull - DHS Principal
- Statement from student [REDACTED]
- Statement from Dr. Mari A. Banks - Equity Director
- Statement from Jewish Student Union (Collective)
- Anonymous complaint submitted via the district Equity Website

Witness Summaries:

Anthony Downer (Respondent)

The meeting took place on Friday, October 25, 2024, in the office of the Chief Human Resources Officer, with Mr. Anthony Downer, Chief Adena Walker, and Dr. Monica Batiste in attendance. Mr. Downer arrived with representation; however, it was explained to him that standard protocol does not permit representation during an investigative

interview unless additional counsel is present. Chief Walker informed Mr. Downer that he could step out to consult with his counsel at any time if needed. Following introductions, Chief Walker outlined the internal investigation protocol and explained the structure of the meeting.

Key areas discussed included the keffiyeh's meaning to him, his intentions in wearing it, and its impact on the school community.

1. Interaction with Students:

- Mr. Downer stated he did not provide any direct instruction or encouragement to students about the keffiyeh. He also did not recall any students asking questions about his wearing it.
- He clarified that he did not wear the keffiyeh while actively teaching, but wore it to show solidarity with students like [REDACTED] who expressed feeling marginalized.

2. Possession and Use of the Keffiyeh:

- Mr. Downer could not recall when he purchased the keffiyeh, but he indicated that he had worn it once or twice at school prior to October 7, 2024. He keeps it in his classroom and occasionally takes it home, although he does not remember specific instances of doing so.

3. Symbolism and Intentions:

- Mr. Downer stated that he wore the keffiyeh in solidarity with underrepresented and marginalized students, particularly in response to a student, [REDACTED] who told him he would be wearing one that day.
- He acknowledged multiple perspectives surrounding the keffiyeh's symbolism, especially considering the significance of October 7 due to an attack on Israel, which some view as a genocidal act.
- He emphasized that his goal was not to advocate for one group over another but to stand in solidarity with Muslim students who, he noted, are underrepresented in the district.

4. Awareness of Potential Disruption:

- When asked if he anticipated a potential disruption by wearing the keffiyeh on a sensitive date, Mr. Downer responded that his intention was to support underrepresented students, viewing the situation as complex and multifaceted rather than binary.
- He mentioned speaking with a student, [REDACTED] who shared that [REDACTED] felt targeted by the administration, reflecting Mr. Downer's awareness of the challenges faced by students of diverse backgrounds.

5. Consultation and Professional Judgment:

- Mr. Downer stated that he did not consult with school administration about his choice to wear the keffiyeh, as he views clothing choices as personal decisions.
- He affirmed that, in his professional judgment, wearing the keffiyeh was appropriate and aligned with his role in promoting inclusivity. He expressed a belief that he should continue supporting diverse

perspectives within his class, which focuses on Black and underrepresented students.

6. Reflection and Future Considerations:

- Mr. Downer acknowledged that he was unaware some students might feel unsafe due to his decision. However, he maintained that he would make the same choice in the future, emphasizing that his actions were intended to foster inclusivity and understanding within the school community.

Mr. Downer's responses indicate a commitment to supporting marginalized voices and fostering a sense of inclusivity. However, the timing and nature of wearing the keffiyeh on a sensitive date presented challenges, leading to broader concerns about its impact on the diverse school community.

Benjamin Kaplan (Complainant)

The meeting took place on October 22, 2024, in the Wilson Center Conference Room, attended by Mr. Ben Kaplan, Chief Adena Walker, and Dr. Monica Batiste. The purpose was to review events surrounding Mr. Downer's alleged actions of encouraging students to wear a keffiyeh on October 7, 2024, and any related student concerns. Key points discussed included:

1. Mr. Downer's Actions and Statements:

- Mr. Kaplan confirmed that Mr. Downer wore the keffiyeh on October 7, but stated he had not personally heard or seen Mr. Downer express support for any side in the Israel/Gaza conflict or encourage students to do so.

2. Student Impact:

- Mr. Kaplan noted a prior incident with a student [REDACTED] who displayed pro-Palestinian stickers but said that this October 7 incident felt more targeted. He did not know specific student names or if students were part of a program, though he noted Jewish students expressed concerns in a letter to the district.

3. Previous Interactions with Mr. Downer:

- Mr. Kaplan recounted a civil but unresolved conversation with Mr. Downer from October 2023. Kaplan felt Mr. Downer's apology was insincere after expressing offense over his actions. Additionally, Kaplan noted Jewish Student Union members were upset over his actions to wear the keffiyeh on October 7th and expressed their concerns in a letter.

4. Additional Concerns:

- Mr. Kaplan expressed a sense of unresolved conflict from prior interactions and lingering concerns about the impact of Mr. Downer's actions on both Jewish students and the broader school community.

Dr. Duane Sprull - Decatur High School Principal

The meeting on October 22, 2024, was held in Dr. Sprull's office, with Dr. Duane Sprull, Chief Adena Walker, and Dr. Monica Batiste in attendance. Following introductions, Chief Walker outlined the internal investigation protocol and the meeting's structure.

Background Information: The statements being reviewed stemmed from two prior meetings. The first, focused on equity issues, included Mr. Downer, Dr. Banks, and Dr. Sprull. A follow-up meeting was held with Mr. Downer, Dr. Sprull, and Ms. Newton Scott.

1. Recollections and Observations:

- Dr. Sprull confirmed recollection of Mr. Downer wearing the keffiyeh on October 7, noting that he had not seen him wear it on other days. The keffiyeh was described as typically draped over Mr. Downer's chair.
- Sprull stated they had not heard Mr. Downer make statements or advocate for either side in the Israel/Gaza conflict to students.

2. Student Interaction and Perception:

- Dr. Sprull reported that [REDACTED], a student, mentioned encouraging Mr. Downer to wear the keffiyeh on October 7. During a subsequent meeting with students, including [REDACTED] students expressed support for Mr. Downer, discussing a potential protest on his behalf.
- When asked about student relations, Dr. Sprull indicated that Mr. Downer maintains a positive rapport with his students and responds well to constructive feedback. A few students inquired about advocating for Mr. Downer's return to school.
- Dr. Sprull indicates his concern about other student groups including a group of Jewish students who had voiced their concerns in a collective letter.

3. Parental and Community Feedback:

- Dr. Sprull had not received direct complaints from parents but indicated that parental concerns were being directed to the district office. Although unaware of discussions in community forums, they mentioned a private Facebook group where such topics might be discussed.
- Dr. Sprull highlighted that Jewish students collectively voiced concerns about the incident in a letter to him and to district administration.

4. Professional Conduct and Feedback:

- Dr. Sprull described Mr. Downer's demeanor as generally professional. He affirmed that Mr. Downer's statement regarding a prior conversation with Dr. Sprull on October 9 accurately reflected their understanding of events.
- When asked about the potential impact of Mr. Downer's return on students, Dr. Sprull stated that Mr. Downer's generally positive relationships with students could support a constructive learning environment. However, was concerned about the impact on other students who would still feel uncomfortable and/or unsafe with Mr. Downer's return to Decatur High School.

5. Concerns and Broader Context:

- Dr. Sprull noted a potential issue with One Goal's perception of the incident, as some in the program felt that Mr. Downer's actions could impact its reputation.
- Concerns were also raised regarding a perceived pattern in Mr. Downer's behavior, especially as some students compared the keffiyeh incident to other instances of symbolic expression, such as a student wearing an IDF shirt. Dr. Sprull explained that while some students drew parallels, the two incidents should not be equated as one is the action of an adult and one is the action of a student.
- Dr. Sprull is concerned about the pattern of behavior in lack of judgment of an educator not being inclusive of all students with his actions in this incident and in the previous situations.

The interview reflected a nuanced perspective on Mr. Downer's relationships with students and the incident's impact on the school and broader community. Although students largely viewed Mr. Downer favorably and expressed support, the community, particularly Jewish students, expressed concerns about the implications of his actions, creating a complex situation with multiple viewpoints.

██████████ Student

██████████ stated that no one influenced ██████████ decision to wear the keffiyeh in a particular way or on a specific day. ██████████ wears the keffiyeh to show support for Lebanon and Palestine and was inspired by the Muslim Student Association (MSA), a Muslim club. ██████████ also mentioned that ██████████ wears ██████████ keffiyeh when ██████████ goes to the mosque.

Dr. Mari Banks - Equity and Professional Learning Director

In discussing the situation with Mr. Downer, Dr. Banks emphasized the importance of understanding that any actions taken on behalf of one group can have broader implications for others, particularly in maintaining classrooms as safe spaces for all students. Dr. Banks expressed concern that Mr. Downer's actions had compromised the sense of safety for Jewish students.

Mr. Downer explained that he wore the keffiyeh on October 7 to elevate the perspectives of marginalized communities. He acknowledged he had not considered the potential impact on Jewish students. He expressed that he saw the district's and broader U.S. focus on Jewish concerns as having white supremacist undertones, excluding Muslim students, whom he felt were an underserved group. Mr. Downer reiterated his desire to see more support for Muslim students within the district.

Dr. Banks noted that while Mr. Downer appeared to understand and agree with their concerns, he remained steadfast in his belief in the appropriateness of his actions.

Jewish Student Union Statement Summary

A group of Jewish students at Decatur High School submitted a statement expressing their concerns over an incident involving a member of the CSD staff. They reported feeling fearful and uncomfortable after Mr. Downer wore a keffiyeh on October 7, 2024, a date which marks the anniversary of a tragic attack on Jewish people, widely viewed within the Jewish community as a day of mourning and remembrance. The students argued that the keffiyeh, as worn on this specific day, symbolized Palestinian nationalism associated with groups seen by some as promoting anti-Israel sentiments. They felt this action was deliberate, noting that Mr. Downer had not previously worn the keffiyeh and questioned his choice to wear it on a sensitive date for the Jewish community.

The statement referenced prior instances of perceived antisemitic rhetoric from Mr. Downer, which they believe have led to previous investigations. Citing the CSD Student Code of Conduct, the students pointed out that symbolic gestures and insults are prohibited, suggesting that this standard should apply to staff as well as students. They expressed disappointment in what they perceived as a lack of response from the school administration and called for action, emphasizing their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The statement closed by providing resources on the keffiyeh's history and associations with specific organizations.

Anonymous Complaint Summary (CSD Equity Website)

The statement expresses concern over a CSD DEI staff member's decision to wear a keffiyeh at Decatur High School on October 7, a day of mourning for the Jewish community marking the anniversary of an attack that resulted in the deaths of 1,200 people. The writer views this choice as provocative and insensitive, suggesting it contradicts the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The statement questions the intent behind this act, the appropriateness of this choice from an individual in a leadership role, and whether Jewish students feel supported and included. It concludes by questioning if the school district will take action in response.

6. Findings

- The student who Mr. Downer allegedly encouraged to wear the keffiyeh stated [REDACTED] chose to wear the garment of [REDACTED] own volition and not because of anything Mr. Downer said.
- Mr. Downer stated that, if given another opportunity, he would wear the keffiyeh again.
- He focused on the impact his actions had within his classroom, emphasizing support for marginalized students, rather than considering the broader student population.
- His actions appeared to support the views of one group over others, conflicting with the district's goal of "All means All" for all students. His actions distracted and interfered with the instruction of all students because some groups of students did not feel safe in their learning environment as a result of his actions.

- While citing a commitment to equity, he did not account for the perspectives of Jewish students and others from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds.
 - His actions did not align with CSD or One Goal initiatives.
 - His actions did not align with the restorative practices established last school year with Jewish staff and students, where he presented himself as an ally.
- **Discrepancies or Conflicts:**
 - Mr. Downer frequently referenced standing in solidarity with his Muslim students when discussing the keffiyeh but did not address the impact his actions had on others. He also stated that given another opportunity, he would wear the keffiyeh again, despite being informed that some students felt unsafe with him wearing it on October 7, 2024.
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7. Violations:

- **Unsubstantiated:** Encouraged a student to wear the Keffiyeh on the anniversary of October 7th a significant event in the Israel-Gaza conflict.
- **Unsubstantiated:** Violation of CSD Dress Code - City Schools of Decatur's Dress Code prohibits an employee from wearing any attire that may distract from the learning or professional environment.
- **Substantiated:** Violations of Code of Ethics for Georgia Educators: Standard 9 Professionalism.
 - Mr. Downer did not fulfill his responsibility to act in the best interest of all students as a professional educator.
 - Mr. Downer's actions compromised students' sense of security by not ensuring a safe environment for all students.
 - Mr. Downer's actions appeared to show favoritism toward one group of students over another. His actions did not align with CSD or One Goal initiatives
- **Substantiated:** Lack of Professional Judgment as an educator in a public school system.
 - Mr. Downer stated that, if given another opportunity, he would wear the keffiyeh again.
 - Mr. Downer's actions appeared to support the views of one group over others, conflicting with the district's goal of "All means All" for all students.

END OF FINAL INVESTIGATION REPORT