

The Star-Ledger

N.J. attorney general speaks to students at Jewish schools in wake of Jersey City attack

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NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published Dec. 21, 2019

On Dec. 8, a student newspaper in West Orange published a story about anti-Semitism.

The article, from the Golda Och Academy, focused on attacks out of state. But the threat felt close to home. A teacher at the Jewish day school said he could feel a change in the atmosphere since last year's attack in Pittsburgh. Students had noted increased security at their synagogues.

Two days later, two people opened fire in a kosher market in Jersey City. Six people died.

In the wake of that attack, New Jersey's attorney general has visited Jewish schools around the state, part of a broader effort to target hate speech in classrooms.

Gurbir Grewal visited Solomon Schechter in New Milford on Monday, according to a spokeswoman, and then spoke to more than 1,000 students and staff at the Frisch School in Paramus later in the week.

At Golda Och on Thursday, he stood in front of more than 200 middle and high school students. Hate crimes are rising, he said, and many incidents have happened in schools.

"I think we all should be very concerned," Grewal said.

The way some schools had responded to anti-Semitism in the past was "woefully insufficient," he said. Drawings of Swastikas needed to be treated like sexting, he said later: Parents should be notified, assemblies held and students put through specialized curriculum. Addressing prejudice early could potentially prevent future tragedies.

"We need a better protocol to respond to incidents of bias and hate in our schools," he told reporters afterward.

Grewal flagged bigoted comments from a Jersey City Board of Education member as something to speak out against, and he said both "political rhetoric" and social media were making it easier for hate groups to spread their message.

He was joined on stage by Andrew Campi, deputy director of New Jersey's Homeland Security office, and Lt. Col. Geoffrey Noble, deputy superintendent of the State Police. In the back was Rachel Apner, head of the civil rights office, who oversaw recent hearings

about classroom bias and has gone after a school district for not doing more to protect a Jewish student.

Hearing the attorney general talk was reassuring, said 17-year-old seniors Eva Hale and Ben Hirsh.

Hale said she was glad authorities were monitoring social media, and Hirsh said he appreciated hearing about how the state's "red flag" law allowed a judge to take someone's guns in certain circumstances.

Hearing personal details about Grewal made it feel like the state was on their side, said Rick Ober, a history and government teacher.

"It was deeply moving," he said.

Grewal, who was born to Indian immigrants in Jersey City, spoke at length about racism he's experienced as a Sikh American. After the 9/11 attacks, he said he was called a "terrorist" and "Osama bin Laden," prejudice that helped push him to enter public service.

The head of Golda Och, Adam Shapiro, said the attorney general's appearance was crucial because students needed to talk about threats. Today's parents didn't need to discuss active shooter drills with their parents, he said, but they needed to have those conversations with their kids now.