

RELIGIOUS ACTION CENTER
OF REFORM JUDAISM

STATEMENT OF
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DIRECTOR AND COUNSEL,
RELIGIOUS ACTION CENTER OF REFORM JUDAISM

ON BEHALF OF

THE UNION OF AMERICAN HEBREW CONGREGATIONS
AND THE
CENTRAL CONFERENCE OF AMERICAN RABBIS

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The Religious Action Center pursues social justice and religious liberty by mobilizing the American Jewish community and serving as its advocate in the nation's capital

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The Religious Action Center is under the auspices of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism, a joint instrumentality of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations with its affiliates: American Conference of Cantors, ARZA/WORLD UNION, North America, National Association of Temple Educators, North American Federation of Temple Brotherhoods, Women of Reform Judaism, and North American Federation of Temple Youth

My name is Rabbi David Saperstein, and I direct the Social Justice Arm of the Reform Jewish Movement - the largest segment of American Jewry. I have lived in the District of Columbia for over 25 years. Through the Interfaith Council of Washington, I have long been involved in addressing local concerns. It has been my honor as well to serve for 13 years on the national board of the NAACP, the executive committee of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, and I currently serve as the chair of the federal U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. The latter allows me to draw on my background as an attorney and a long time professor of Church-State Law and Religious Law at Georgetown University Law Center.

Much of my life's work, the work of institution I represent, and of the Jewish community generally, has been devoted towards the cause of building just, equitable, and pluralistic community life across this nation. It is because we believe in this goal, and in this city, that my wife and I chose to make our home in Washington D.C., raising our children on a street that, in its religious and racial diversity, represents the values we cherish.

Each of the several score of District families that have decided to send their children to JPDS do so for slightly different reasons. What we all have in common is that we are fulfilling our religious obligations in strengthening the Jewish identities of our children. For Ellen and myself, having sent our kids for five years to our wonderful

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neighborhood public school, after a seven-month sabbatical in Israel we decided to send our kids to a Jewish Day school to solidify the Hebrew and Jewish study grounding that they had received in Israel.

What a blessing to have found a school like JPDS in our city. Earlier in my career, I was in charge of developing day school policy for my entire movement. I evaluated similar schools – Jewish and Christian – throughout the United States. I tell you with no hesitancy, JPDS is one of the best I have ever seen, a treasure that our city should cherish. That is why, presented to you today, is a letter signed by every rabbi of every synagogue in the District – an almost unprecedented act of unity – urging that this Board approve the request to accommodate the school at the 16th Street site. They united behind this cause because it is their member families and their surrounding communities that are being served. They know what an extraordinary attraction a quality Jewish Day school like this can be in serving the needs of their members and bringing new members into the District, and into their synagogues.

This is so not only because of the extraordinarily high level of teaching that our gifted faculty provides, not only because of the passion the school has (both as an institution and for its students) to engage in social service in the surrounding community, but, above all, for the remarkable parents I have met there. Substantial numbers of these men and women have dedicated their lives to public service and social justice. If ever there was a school community that deeply understood the need for a school to contribute to the surrounding community and to work cooperatively to insure that neighborhood concerns are addressed and that the presence of the school emerges as a blessing and not a detriment to the surrounding neighborhoods, it is the JPDS school family.

JPDS is the only Jewish day school located in the District of Columbia. Like so many of us, it has made a conscious decision not to leave the District, even though it would be easier to find space in the suburbs. The administration and the families made this decision because they are committed to maintaining and attracting a vibrant Jewish community in the District. I hope the city – including this Board of Zoning Adjustment – welcomes such commitments and will allow the school to work with the community in which it will temporarily dwell to further this goal, even while we develop a suitable permanent site to help ensure that other young families will be attracted to join us here in building a wonderful future.