

Senate Education Committee Testimony on Holocaust Education Bill S.87

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Good afternoon Senators. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on proposed Holocaust Education Bill S.87. My name is Perry Bellow-Handelman and I come to you wearing several hats. I am a Social Science Teacher at Montpelier High School where I teach 10th grade World History, a senior elective on Social Change Theory and Practice, and serve as an advisor to the student-led Racial Justice Alliance. I have worked as a high school educator for over 16 years, and have many years of experience leading professional development training in Vermont and California on ethnic studies education, trauma-informed practice, and Jewish history. I am a Jewish Vermonter, a mother of Jewish children, and resident of Middlesex Vermont.

I am a strong supporter of Holocaust education. I teach a 6-week unit every year in my 10th grade class that examines the events leading up to the Holocaust, its implementation, legacy, and continued relevance today. Antisemitic, homophobic and racist ideas continue to proliferate in our society, and in the recent decade have become more visible as White Supremacist ideologies have resurfaced in mainstream politics. In the Montpelier Roxbury Public School district we have had numerous instances of antisemitic bullying and vandalism in recent years. Holocaust education is one essential component of preventing the spread of this ideology.

That said, I have three significant concerns about this bill as currently written.

1) I would like to address the potential negative consequences of mandating six hours of Holocaust education every year of the middle and high school grades.

Foremost, this is not a trauma-informed approach to teaching this very sensitive material. The Holocaust is a triggering subject for many young people who belong to targeted groups. It can also be the avenue in which supremacist ideas students have learned outside of school surface in the school community. The Holocaust, like all other supremacist movements, must be taught deliberately by a content expert, in a strong container, with a trauma-informed approach, in the proper historical context. As a mother, I do not want my Jewish children to sit through six hours of superficial treatment of this material over the course of seven consecutive years. Nor would I wish for Black students to be forced to sit through lessons about racial slavery every year, nor for indigenous students to study the history of European colonization annually either.

Furthermore, from a learner perspective, it is also not helpful for this material to be repeated every year. As history teachers, we know that any time we cover the same topic on an annual basis, it begins to feel repetitive to students and loses its impact. A more appropriate pedagogical approach would be

to touch on the Holocaust experience through a humanities lens at some point in middle school, and through a social science lens inside a global studies curriculum in high school.

2) I'd like to address the topics that are required to be covered under this bill. There are many key facets of Holocaust education missing.

Topics that I and many other Holocaust educators believe are essential to understanding this history include:

- The robust, militant and creative resistance led by members of targeted groups
- The personal risks taken by countless Europeans who acted in solidarity with targeted groups
- The inclusion of socialists amongst the targeted groups and the emergence of fascist ideologies as a response to socialist revolutions
- The strategies used by the Nazi Party to gain a foothold in German society, and the combined impact of indoctrination and economic promises
- The use of antisemitism as a strategy for maintaining ruling class power throughout over a millenia of European history
- The tactics employed during European colonization that were copied by the Nazis
- The connection to the social construction of race and the eugenics movement in the United States
- The refusal of the United States to provide asylum for Holocaust refugees after WWII
- The ten stages of genocide framework through which we can understand the commonalities between the Holocaust and other instances of genocide

When I introduce a unit on the Holocaust, my students have often heard of it but have a simplistic understanding of it as the result of Hitler's hatred of the Jewish people. My students consistently share that what is most impactful for them in this unit can be summarized in four essential understandings:

- 1) That the groups targeted by the Nazis fought back in whatever ways were available to them.
- 2) That through systematic indoctrination, supremacist ideologies can quickly take hold in otherwise progressive societies.
- 3) That the Holocaust is not a fluke of history, but rather deeply interconnected with the other events we study in modern world history, including histories of colonization, racial slavery, the emergence of industrial capitalism, and political revolutions of this time period.
- 4) That the Holocaust was not an isolated instance, but rather one that we can use as a tool to help identify past and current examples of genocides around the world.

I would urge these understandings to be at the heart of any Holocaust education curriculum.

3) Finally, by mandating Holocaust education, and not Genocide education more broadly, the bill perpetuates an antisemitic trope of Jewish exceptionalism, obscures students' abilities to identify and intervene as the threat of genocide arises today, and minimizes the experiences of young

Vermonters whose families or ancestors experienced one of the many other genocides in recent history.

Antisemitism stems from the same cause as all supremacist ideologies, that is as a strategy of a dominant group to maintain power through the dehumanization, subjugation and scapegoating of targeted groups. Understanding antisemitism in the context of other genocides that have been perpetuated in recent centuries and that are happening today, is a critical tool for young people unlearning the myth that there is something inherently “different” about Jewish people. I am concerned that in making the Holocaust the ONLY specific historical event that Vermont educators are mandated to teach, will further the idea of Jewish exceptionalism.

In decontextualizing the Holocaust from other instances of genocide, this bill also fails to fulfill the most important ethical lesson of the Holocaust, which is the importance of identifying and acting to prevent future genocides. The [ten stages of genocide framework](#), as created by the NGO, Genocide Watch, is used by scholars and human rights organizations around the world. It outlines common themes across instances of genocide and attempted genocide, from the systemic decimation of indigenous people and the system of racial slavery in the Americas, through the genocides committed in Darfur, Rwanda and Bosnia in recent decades, to the current crusades waged this past year against civilians in Artsakh, the Congo, Sudan and Gaza to name a few.

Most gravely, by de-emphasizing other communities that have been impacted by genocide, we risk sending the message to many of our most vulnerable students that their group’s suffering is less important.

My strong recommendation to the Senate Education Committee is to not move forward with the current language in S.87, but rather develop a more inclusive Genocide Education Bill that takes a global approach to understanding these histories, and the current supremacist ideologies and violence in the world today. I would also ask that a committee be convened to write an updated bill that includes middle and high school teachers, historians, human rights experts, and Vermonters who are from communities that have been targeted by genocide.

Sincerely,

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