

**BY E-MAIL & REGULAR U.S. MAIL**

**April 2, 2021**

Richard Corcoran, Commissioner  
Florida Department of Education  
325 West Gaines Street  
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0400

Dear Commissioner Corcoran,

We write to express our concerns with the proposed Holocaust Education standards as shared with members of the Holocaust Education Task Force by Chancellor of Public Schools Jacob Oliva on March 24, 2021.

Florida has always been the standard-bearer in Holocaust Education, beginning with the 1994 funded Florida Mandate 1003.42, the creation of Commissioner's Task Force to implement the Mandate involving teacher training, Holocaust Education resources, as well as creating state-wide Holocaust Education standards. Florida's Holocaust Education Mandate which requires all K-12 school districts to incorporate lessons on the Holocaust as part of public-school instruction, states the following:

“The history of the Holocaust (1933-1945), the systematic, planned annihilation of European Jews and other groups by Nazi Germany, a watershed event in the history of humanity, to be taught in a manner that leads to an investigation of human behavior, an understanding of the ramifications of prejudice, racism, and stereotyping, and an examination of what it means to be a responsible and respectful person, for the purposes of encouraging tolerance of diversity in a pluralistic society and for nurturing and protecting democratic values and institutions, including the policy, definition, and historical and current examples of anti-Semitism, as described in S.1000.05(7), and the prevention of anti-Semitism.”<sup>1</sup>

Educators have long recognized the value of the lessons of the Holocaust as it provides for the pedagogical examination of basic moral issues which can yield critical lessons for an investigation of human behavior. Through the study of the Holocaust, students can come to realize that:

- Democratic institutions and values are not automatically sustained, but need to be appreciated, nurtured, and protected;
- Silence and indifference to the suffering of others, or to the infringement of civil rights in any society, can -- however, unintentionally -- serve to perpetuate the problems; and
- the Holocaust was not an accident in history -- it occurred because individuals, organizations, and governments made choices which not only legalized discrimination, but which allowed prejudice, hatred, and ultimately, mass murder to occur.

Implementing Holocaust Education K-12 is no easy task as it requires introducing a difficult and complex history considering the developmental differences for each grade. After carefully reviewing

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<sup>1</sup>

[http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?mode=View%20Statutes&SubMenu=1&App\\_mode=Display\\_Statute&Search\\_String=Holocaust+education&URL=1000-1099/1003/Sections/1003.42.html](http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?mode=View%20Statutes&SubMenu=1&App_mode=Display_Statute&Search_String=Holocaust+education&URL=1000-1099/1003/Sections/1003.42.html) (webpage last visited on April 1, 2021)

the proposed standards against the recommendations of leaders in the field and our state mandate, we conclude that the standards, in their current form fail to fulfill the mandate.

**Concern 1:** There is no progressive learning applied to the K-8 education standards as currently drafted. The only focus is on identifying concepts with the omission of introducing, defining, explaining, discussing, and processing a given concept.

**Concern 2:** Core concepts such as diversity, empathy, responsibility, and fairness that are necessary to lay a foundation for future learning must be included.

**Concern 3:** Expecting students to discuss Holocaust education in grade 5 before they define the Holocaust in grades 6-8 is not pedagogically sound.

**Concern 4:** The concept of introducing, defining, and understanding one's own role in the community must also be taught. Otherwise, there is no connection in the students' decision-making process in reference to understanding the lessons that should be drawn from Holocaust history.

**Concern 5:** Students should be taught that the Holocaust was not inevitable. "The Holocaust took place because individuals, groups, and nations made decisions to act or not to act. Focusing on those decisions leads to insights into history and human nature and fosters critical thinking."<sup>2</sup>

**Concern 6:** The current draft focuses on religious symbols, holidays, and traditions of Judaism and other religions, which are not precursors to Holocaust education. The major precursor that should be focused on is antisemitism.

**Concern 7:** Throughout the draft document, the Holocaust is taken out of historical context and mention of other genocides has been removed as well as other groups victimized by the Nazis.

As Elie Wiesel said, "Not all victims were Jews, but all Jews were victims." Furthermore, the USHMM reminds us that "the Holocaust teaches us profound truths about human societies and our capacity for evil. An accurate understanding of this history is critical if we are to learn the lessons and honor its victims."<sup>3</sup>

Without the inclusion of testimony from other victim groups, the lessons of the Holocaust grow narrow and inaccurate. Thus, the connection that would make the lessons of the Holocaust relevant to today is absent. Beside focusing only on antisemitism, the draft standards should also focus on broader understanding of where all group-based hatreds can lead.

**Concern 8:** Inserting Zionism and the creation of the State of Israel into the Holocaust curriculum needs to be done within a broader historical context. The draft document also ignores the fact that not all Jews before, during, and after the Holocaust were Zionists.

**Concern 9:** Using words like "fake news" can be misconstrued or misunderstood within our world today. We recommend using the term propaganda.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ushmm.org/teach/fundamentals/guidelines-for-teaching-the-holocaust#THE%20HOLOCAUST%20WAS%20NOT%20INEVITABLE> (webpage visited last April 1, 2021)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ushmm.org/information/press/press-releases/museum-statement-on-international-holocaust-remembrance-day> (webpage visited last April 2, 2021)

**Concern 10:** In order to accurately teach the history of the Holocaust, we must also include standards on pseudoscience of race supremacy; the non-response of the US government before, during, and after the Holocaust; unarmed resistance; the challenges of liberation, aftermath, and the pursuit of justice; as well as the unique and universal implications and ramifications of the lessons of the Holocaust.

Standards should include a discussion about reflection, remembrance, and responsibility so that students will understand what it means to be “a responsible and respectful person”<sup>4</sup> who can celebrate differences and the inherent value of all human life.

Thank you for the opportunity. We look forward to your swift reply, and to continuing to work with you to ensure that all students throughout the State of Florida receive the most effective education about the Holocaust that we are able to provide.

Sincerely,

Yael Hershfield, Interim Regional Director  
Anti-Defamation League  
Florida Commissioner of Education’s Task Force on Holocaust Education Member

Elizabeth Gelman, Executive Director  
The Florida Holocaust Museum  
Florida Commissioner of Education’s Task Force on Holocaust Education Member

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