

Good afternoon Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. My name is Heidi Omlor, I live in Ellsworth, and I'm here to testify in support of **LD 187 An Act To Require Education about African-American History and the History of Genocide.**

In thinking about what I would say today to try and convey the importance of Holocaust and genocide education in our schools, I kept coming back to two thoughts, first genocide and acts of antisemitism are still happening today around the world and second, and most importantly, what Holocaust education offers our students.

Since the Holocaust in the 1940's that claimed 6 million Jewish lives, there have been genocides in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Sudan, and Syria, and this is not a complete list. Together these genocides have claimed nearly another 6 million lives. Everyday there are headlines that remind us of the forces that are behind these acts of genocide and the question remains of why do these acts keep happening? My belief is that the answer is education and the fact that it is often severely lacking. As educators, we promote the idea that education is the key to many things; jobs, higher socioeconomic status, healthier lifestyles, and I would add genocide prevention. By studying the Holocaust and other genocides, students can begin to identify the warning signs of genocide: us vs them, discrimination, dehumanization, persecution, and its most extreme form, extermination. According to the Anti Defamation League, it is estimated that 1.09 billion adults worldwide harbor antisemitic attitudes, many of those individuals have never met a Jewish person.¹ And although I would not say that through educational opportunities all students will have a chance to meet someone who holds different beliefs than they do, I would say that

¹ <https://global100.adl.org/>

students can at least learn about other groups of people, their differences, and begin to understand that differences do not automatically equal wrong, but could instead offer opportunities to learn from and possibly embrace those differences.

I am fortunate to offer a Holocaust and Genocide Studies course at Ellsworth High School. One of the first lessons I teach in this class includes something called “The Pyramid of Hate,”² this visual shows the escalation of genocide. The students and I talk about examples of things they have witnessed or possibly been a part of from the bottom two layers, we then talk about what would happen if those things, name calling, stereotyping, racial slurs were to stop; the students recognize that the entire pyramid would crumble. It is the actions in the bottom two layers that lay the groundwork for genocide. I then tell the students that I believe they have the power to do this, they can stop acts of genocide and they can start today, right where they are they can make a difference.

According to the Anti Defamation League, the number of antisemitic incidents in the US increased by 10 percent in 2020, many of these incidents blamed Jews for the Cornona virus, drawing on an age-old antisemitic stereotype that Jews spread disease.³ Antisemetic acts are in the news almost everyday, my students are constantly sharing articles that they have found and want to discuss in class. The fact that my students have begun to recognize these acts of hatred is just one example of what Holocaust education provides students, a eye opening view of the

² "Pyramid of Hate," ADL.org,
<https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/pyramid-of-hate.pdf>

³ Jonathan A. Greenblatt and CEO Of the Anti-Defamation League, "Covid Quarantine Didn't Stop Antisemitic Attacks from Rising to Near-historic Highs," NBCNews.com, April 27, 2021, accessed May 09, 2021,
<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/covid-quarantine-didn-t-stop-antisemitic-attacks-rising-near-historic-ncna1265425>.

world that although it is not always pretty, it initiates real change in students and in turn in the world. Holocaust education is not just about the event itself, it is about the “big picture,” teaching students to respect differences, helping students understand where prejudice can lead, and showing how fragile democracy can be.

In September 2020, the Claims Conference, a nonprofit organization that secures material claims for survivors of the Holocaust, released the findings of their first ever 50 state survey on Holocaust knowledge. Although the state of Maine did score higher than many other states, overall the findings showed a clear lack of knowledge of the Holocaust. Focusing mostly on Millennials and Gen Z, the survey found that 48% of those who responded could not name a single concentration camp, despite the fact that there were more than 40,000 camps and ghettos. Furthermore 63 percent of those surveyed believed that less than 6 million Jews died in the Holocaust. The most disturbing information revealed that 11 to 19 percent of those surveyed believed the Jews were at fault for the Holocaust.⁴ Although many states claim that the Holocaust is included in most social studies curriculums, the results of this survey clearly tell a different story.

On behalf of myself and my students, I would ask that you consider supporting this bill, the students of Maine deserve to be part of breaking the cycle of hate and indifference in our world.

Thank you.

⁴ Claims Conference, "FIRST-EVER 50-STATE SURVEY ON HOLOCAUST KNOWLEDGE OF AMERICAN MILLENNIALS AND GEN Z REVEALS SHOCKING RESULTS," Claims Conference, January 14, 2021, [PAGE], accessed May 09, 2021, <http://www.claimscon.org/millennial-study>.