

Montgomery County Jewish Parents Coalition



One Community, many voices. United Against Antisemitism.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 1386 with amendments. I am Dr. Paula Bienenfeld, and I am testifying on behalf of the Montgomery County Jewish Parents Coalition. The Montgomery County Jewish Parents Coalition was founded in 2021 in response to the alarming increase in antisemitism in Montgomery County, Maryland, in particular, the antisemitism, from both students and teachers, in the Montgomery County Public School (MCPS) system. The Coalition consists of hundreds of parents and resident activists working as volunteers to fight antisemitism and antiZionism in the county. In addition to fighting antisemitism in the schools we raise our Jewish voices in the county through events like Jewish American Heritage Month; and we testify and work with county and state legislators and agencies to stop JewHated and to support Israel. We are a powerful, consistent Jewish voice fighting antisemitism wherever and whenever we see it.

We support House Bill 1386 with amendments. This action is sorely needed not only in Montgomery County but throughout the State of Maryland. In our discussions with MCPS teachers and students, it is clear that antisemitism is on the rise and that it is coming from both students and teachers. This increase is verified by Montgomery County Police reports. This bill addresses the desperate need for teacher and staff training on what antisemitism is; its ancient history; and its current context, the ‘new antisemitism.’ It should address the fact that Judaism is not only a religion. We are a nation and a people that have existed and thrived for over 3,000 years. It may be difficult for those of other faiths or groups to understand this basic fact and we look forward to training which will address what Judaism is. We thank the members of the House and Senate for putting this bill forward and urge its adoption.

In the same way racism bias does harm to our students and teachers, antisemitism adversely affects our children and their teachers. Yet antisemitism was never addressed in our MCPS schools, even though our organization repeatedly requested it be included in the regular antiracism training that goes on often in our public schools. As yet there is no consistent appropriate teacher and staff training on antisemitism. We appreciate that the bill that requires the antibias training includes antisemitism, as MCPS refused repeatedly to include it in their antiracism training. We expect robust, ‘evidence-based’ training on antisemitism.

Given the unprecedented levels of antisemitism in our public schools, coming both from students and from teachers, it is critical that this legislation be passed, to require training on antisemitism, to counteract in part the horrific hatred to which our Jewish students are subjected. Our members have heard from Jewish students and their parents of children being yelled at, physically assaulted, children who have had their yarmulkes pulled off their heads, children who no longer wear their tsitsis (religious garb) because they are afraid. We have heard personally from our students of the antisemitic statements made by teachers in the classroom. We have heard from teachers in MCPS who are afraid to wear any jewelry signifying they are Jews, and are, in the words of one teacher, 'just keeping my head down.' We have heard from teachers who are tearful and in pain because MCPS will not acknowledge the antisemitism prevalent in our schools and will do almost nothing to prevent it.

We appreciate that the bill states that the Department shall incorporate lessons learned from real life incidents. The Jewish Parents Coalition has heard numerous personal statements from Jewish children and Jewish teachers subject to vile antisemitism, and the creation of an atmosphere of fear in our MCPS schools. No child, no teacher, no staff member, should EVER be afraid to go to school. No child should EVER feel unwelcome in our public schools. We expect the implementation of the directions of this bill will work strongly to end Jew hatred in our schools.

No child should be afraid to attend our county public schools, and no parent should be afraid to send their children to school. Yet within the last few years this is what has happened. An atmosphere reminiscent of 1930s Europe is taking hold here in the U.S., and here in Montgomery County. One teacher said to us, 'there are swastikas everywhere.' This must stop now.

The requirement for training on antisemitism in our schools is long overdue. Education about the history of the Jews, including the context and years-long run-up to the horrors and genocide of the Holocaust, as well as the history of Jews in the United States, as a marginalized group of people, is critical to an understanding of the meaning of 'Never again' and the current precarious position of Jews in our nation. It is critical in our efforts to deconstruct antisemitism and end Jew hatred in Maryland.

We are an ancient people and we have been through all this before. There is no hate you can throw at us that will stop us or intimidate us. This bill is required now for MCPS to recognize and acknowledge the vicious antisemitism that is coursing through the school system, and which must be stopped immediately. No more antisemitic students. No more antisemitic teachers. This stops now.

We request this amendment, given that one-half day every other year is not sufficient to stop Jew hatred in our public schools:

For Section (C)(1), instead of 'every other year' please replace with 'every year.'

For Section (C)(3)(II) please replace 'Take a half day or less to complete;' with 'Take a full day to complete.'

Thank you.