

House Bill 1386

Testimony from Nicole Kashtan, Maryland Resident

My name is Nicole Kashtan, and I am writing today in support of House Bill 1386. As a Jewish parent of two young kids in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) I know firsthand that it is imperative that all teachers across the State of Maryland receive robust training on antisemitism. Teachers are the first line of defense when antisemitic actions occur and must have the knowledge and tools to identify and disrupt antisemitic behavior in their classrooms.

The way this bill currently reads, a large emphasis will be on educator training related to the Holocaust. While learning about the Holocaust is very important, the educator training must also focus on modern antisemitism, notably, anti-Zionism. Zionism is the belief that Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish state and that the Jewish people have a right to self-determination in their homeland. Nothing more, nothing less. Teachers must learn that when students, or even other staff members, make statements such as "From the River to the Sea Palestine Will Be Free" and "Globalize the Intifada" they are just as antisemitic as "Heil Hitler" and make Jewish students and staff members feel unsafe and unwelcome. Especially since October 7th, even mentioning that one supports Israel or at the very least doesn't want to see it be destroyed by terrorist organizations can lead to one being called a "genocide apologist", "settler colonialist" or "imperialist" or "white nationalist." Too often, these labels are dismissed as "free speech" when in fact they are hate speech and have no place in school.

In addition, the teacher training must stress that being Jewish is not only or primarily a religion. It is also an ethnicity, culture, and nation of people, who are indigenous to the land of Israel. It is a common misconception that being Jewish is a "choice" and one that a person can discard, when in fact our Jewishness is coded into our DNA and is not something we can change.

Finally, I would recommend amending the bill to add to the definition of "cultural diversity" to not only mean the inclusion of racial and ethnic groups and individuals that are or were historically underrepresented, but to also include the groups that experience the most incidents of hate/bias in education, as may be reflected in federal, state or local law enforcement records tracking such incidents.

Given the explosion of antisemitism in Maryland, especially in schools and amongst young people, this legislation cannot wait. Please pass House Bill 1386.