



**Massachusetts Joint Committee on Education
H.566/S.327 – An Act concerning genocide education**

Statement of Robert Trestan
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Good morning. My name is Robert Trestan, and I am the Regional Director in the Anti-Defamation League’s (ADL’s) New England Office. I am pleased to be here this morning to testify on behalf of ADL in support of H.566/S.327—a bill that will ensure that Massachusetts public school students receive Holocaust and genocide education prior to high school graduation.

Since 1913, ADL’s mission has been “to stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair treatment to all.” Dedicated to combating anti-Semitism, prejudice, and bigotry of all kinds, as well as defending democratic ideals and promoting civil rights, ADL is proud of its leadership role in developing innovative materials, programs, and services that build bridges of communication, understanding, and respect among diverse racial, religious, and ethnic groups. ADL has also been honored to work closely with the Armenian National Committee of Eastern Massachusetts and the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston in leading a Massachusetts Genocide Education Coalition here in the Commonwealth—a group of over 75 social justice organizations, faith congregations, and concerned individuals who are committed to seeing this *Genocide Education Act* signed into law here in Massachusetts.

Over the years, ADL has developed unique expertise and insight regarding the importance of Holocaust and genocide education in K-12 schools. Since 2005, ADL, in partnership with the USC Shoah Foundation and Yad Vashem World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, has trained more than 50,000 educators through the *Echoes & Reflections* Holocaust education program, which allows teachers to introduce students to the complex themes of the Holocaust and its impact on the world. In total, the program has reached an estimated 5.2 million students across the United States. ADL has also partnered with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to develop its *Law Enforcement and Society: Lessons of the Holocaust* program (LEAS) – an innovative

training that examines what can happen when law enforcement personnel do not uphold democratic principles.

The need for Holocaust and genocide education in K-12 schools could not be more urgent. In 2018 alone, ADL documented 59 anti-Semitic incidents in K-12 schools here in Massachusetts, and 344 anti-Semitic incidents in schools across the country. Many of these incidents involved the drawing of swastikas and the use of hateful language such as “Heil Hitler” and Holocaust-related messages.

These incidents did not take place in a vacuum. They come at a time of rising bigotry, the emboldening of hate groups, and a resurgence of Holocaust denialism—a challenge that has existed on the fringes for many years, but in recent years has encroached on the mainstream of our politics and discourse. They also come at a time when Holocaust and genocide awareness, particularly among young people, is fading from memory. According to one recent survey, for example, 22% of American millennials have either never heard of the Holocaust or are unsure whether they have heard of it. Only 35% of all Americans know about the Armenian Genocide.

These statistics are not a coincidence. When our students do not understand the history of genocide or the elements leading to it, they cannot fully grasp the significance of their actions or the tremendous harm they can cause to the school community. Education is therefore key to combating hate. By learning about the Holocaust and other genocides, students will have the opportunity to explore how stereotypes, prejudice, and religious and ethnic hatred can escalate to atrocity.

Soon, the eyewitnesses to the Holocaust and other genocides will no longer be able to tell their own stories, and the responsibility will shift to family members, institutions, educators and individuals to share their narrative and experiences. This context only further underscores the pressing need for Holocaust and genocide education in Massachusetts schools. Words and actions matter, and it is imperative that our students understand the risks when hatred and bigotry go unchecked.

Though Massachusetts has previously taken the important step of ensuring that the Commonwealth's curricular guidelines address genocide and human rights issues, there is still no legislative mandate that would require Massachusetts schools to teach this content prior to high school graduation. By codifying such a mandate, Massachusetts would join 11 other states across the country in sending a strong and clear message to educators, students, and families that our Commonwealth recognizes the importance of genocide education and is committed to doing everything possible to prevent the rise and escalation of bias-motivated incidents in schools.

Here in Massachusetts, we have both a unique opportunity and an important obligation to empower a new generation to learn from our past to build a stronger and more tolerant society in the future. Thank you for your time and attention to this very important bill.

We hope that the committee will release the bill with a favorable report.