

12-2-2019

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Recommended Citation

Tall, Shira, "Holocaust Education in Connecticut: The Passing and Implementation of Senate Bill No. 452" (2019). *Honors Scholar Theses*. 643.
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Holocaust Education in Connecticut: The Passing and Implementation of Senate Bill No. 452
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“I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no person should witness: gas chambers built by learned engineers. Children poisoned by educated physicians. Infants killed by trained nurses. Women and babies shot by high school and college graduates. So, I am suspicious of education.

My request is: Help your children become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths or educated Eichmanns. Reading, writing, and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human.”

- Haim Ginott

Introduction

In May 2018, the state of Connecticut passed a bill mandating Holocaust and genocide education and awareness as part of the social studies curriculum for each school district in the state (SB No. 452, 2018). Connecticut was not the first state to require such a mandate; several other states passed similar bills first, yet it was only the tenth state to pass such a law. This raised the question of *why* the state of Connecticut was mandating such a curriculum and what was the educational and political context for proposing and passing such a bill. In order to explore these questions and better understand the process, I completed several steps including a literature review and interviews with key stakeholders. After interviewing key stakeholders critical in the passing, advocacy, and education of the Holocaust, I found that the bill was perhaps only successful in its passage now because of the larger social and historical contexts. A few criticisms of the language of the bill exist surfaced as well. Finally, stakeholder’s rationale for teaching the Holocaust varied.

Research Methods

Research methods to answer my questions consist of using several books, academic journals, and public records of legal documents. Relevant texts were gathered and then annotated and read. These documents were helpful in providing background information and coverage of Holocaust and genocide education as well as contextualizing research. Additionally, five interviews were conducted where participants were asked their position and involvement with

Holocaust education, why they believed it's important, and what effective Holocaust education looks like. They were then asked to describe what the process was like in creating Connecticut Senate Bill No. 452 and how the bill has been implemented in the state. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and read for analysis. The five interviewees included educational advocates, scholars, and state legislators. For confidentiality their names or exact positions are not disclosed.

Definitions of the Holocaust & Genocide

The Holocaust

In order to understand the importance of the Holocaust, genocide, and the mandate, the words "Holocaust" and "genocide" first have to be defined. According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), the official United States memorial for the Holocaust, the Holocaust was the:

Systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. During the era of the Holocaust, German authorities also targeted other groups because of their perceived "racial inferiority": Roma (Gypsies), the disabled, and some of the Slavic peoples (Poles, Russians, and others). Other groups were persecuted on political, ideological, and behavioral grounds, among them Communists, Socialists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and homosexuals (USHMM, 2019).

Likewise, on their website, the Connecticut Department of Education says the Holocaust was:

The systematic persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators during the Second World War. The Holocaust (Shoah in Hebrew; Khurbn in Yiddish) remains an event that defies comprehension, as it

became state policy to pursue the elimination of a culture, a religion, and ethnic minority that was not a combatant in the war itself... The Nazis and their collaborators murdered 1.5 million children over the course of the Holocaust. Had the Nazis realized their goal of world domination, every single Jew in the world, 16.9 million by 1939 estimates, would have been a target for annihilation... As it unfolded, the Holocaust was not one event, but a series of policies and actions (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2019).

Genocide

Using Article II of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations (1948), genocide is defined in five parts as “any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (B) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (C) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (D) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (E) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (“Convention” 1948).

On the Connecticut State Department of Education’s (2019) website, after presenting the background of the word coined by Raphael Lemkin, it is written:

The new term was defined as certain acts committed “with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such.” (The Convention went on to list a specific set of actions covered by the convention, including “Killing (or) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life

calculated to bring about its physical destruction...; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”)

There is not a significant change in definition on Connecticut State Department of Education’s website. It is important to note though that the term genocide may be seen as committed so long as there is *intent* to destroy.

Implications of Definitions

The notable difference in definitions occurs with regards to the term “Holocaust.” It is important to note that the USHMM definition is specific as it refers to the persecution and murder of Jews. While it does mention others targeted by the Nazis, this was noted as during the era of the Holocaust and does not refer to the term Holocaust itself. It also notes that Jews were not just targeted by the Nazi regime but also collaborators who worked with the Nazis as well. USHMM more narrowly defines the term Holocaust as only the murder and persecution of Jews. In contrast to this, the Connecticut State Department of Education says that the Holocaust was not one event, but a series of policies and actions that happened during the Second World War. The definition according to the Connecticut State Department of Education would be more expansive to include historical events such as the Nuremberg Laws, *Kristallnacht*, and Aktion T4, rather than just *Endlösung der Judenfrage* (“The Final Solution”). Additionally, the Connecticut definition also notes that the Holocaust was not a combatant in the war itself. It is important to highlight these slight differences in definition so that we know who is included as victims and survivors within the term “Holocaust” and we know when it is believed that the Holocaust started.

One possibility that teachers might find useful is to use a combination of both the USHMM definition and Connecticut State Department of Education in order to define the term Holocaust. Teachers should use the Connecticut State Department of Education definition as it applies specifically to Jews and makes no mention of other persecuted groups (“The systematic persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators during the Second World War”). The USHMM definition should be used as it applies to the “era of the Holocaust” and was done in a legal way, “systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews...” The State Department also mentions how the Holocaust was not a singular event but was a series of policies and actions. By having the other targeted groups mentioned in the USHMM definition, it almost diminishes the Jewish experience.

If at all possible, the word Holocaust should be entirely avoided because of the etymology of the word. The word holocaust is derived from the Greek *holokauston*, a translation *olah* in Hebrew meaning a burnt sacrifice offered whole to God. While the word was chosen because of the concentration camps where the bodies of the victims were consumed *whole* in crematoria and open fires, there is an implication that Jews were murdered as a sacrifice to God (Berenbaum, 2019). I recommend the Hebrew word *Shoah*, meaning catastrophe or destruction, should be used because it better illustrates the near *destruction* of Jewish life in Europe and does not have the religious connotation as associated with the word holocaust. The term *Shoah* also has historical connotations as when it was first referred to in Jewish textbooks during the 1960s in what was called the Catastrophe (Fallace, 2008).

Why Study the Holocaust?

Before studying the Holocaust or any subject matter, one must ask “Why should this be taught?” or “Why is this important?” The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) lists several reasons that the Holocaust is important in terms of teaching and learning. It demonstrates the fragility of societies and institutions that are supposed to protect rights; highlights aspects of human behavior; demonstrates dangers of prejudice, discrimination, and antisemitism; deepens reflection about contemporary issues; draws attentions to institutions developed after World War II and the Holocaust such as the United Nations; and highlights international efforts to respond to genocide (UNESCO, 2018).

USHMM says that in asking why Holocaust history should be taught it is important to also reflect on why students should learn this history, the most significant lessons students should learn from studying the Holocaust, and why a particular document, image, film, or reading is appropriate for conveying what educators wish to teach. USHMM continues that by teaching about the Holocaust, studying addresses are one of the central mandates of education in the United States, which is to examine what it means to be a responsible citizen (“Why teach about the Holocaust?”, 2019). As students gain insight into the historical, social, economic, and personal factors that motivated the Holocaust, they will be able to make informed decisions. As members of the United States, these students will learn to accept and understand diversity as well as think about the responsibilities individuals and countries have with regards to human rights abuses.

Holocaust Education in the United States of America

When it first started being introduced in the United States, Holocaust education was predominantly used in Jewish day schools. It was not until 1973 when Rabbi Raymond Zwerin

and Audrey Friedman Marcus created the Alternatives in Religious Education (ARE) Publishing Company, dedicated to designing “cutting edge” teaching materials (Fallace, 2008). One of their earliest projects were *The Holocaust: A Study in Values* and *Gestapo: A Learning Experience About the Holocaust*. Two events that helped escalate Holocaust education were the Eichmann trial in 1961 and the Six-Day War in 1967. In April of 1978, NBC aired a television miniseries titled the *Holocaust* estimated to be watched by 120 million Americans. For many teachers, this was the first time many of them were confronted with having to teach about the Holocaust. By 1987, 76% of 17-year-olds could identify the term Holocaust and a year later, eight states: New York, California, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia, and Connecticut each developed some kind of state-endorsed Holocaust, genocide, or human rights curriculum. By 2007, Florida, Illinois, and New Jersey directly mandated the teaching in public schools (Fallace, 2008). As of now, there are twelve states that mandate Holocaust education: California, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Oregon (effective 2020), Rhode Island, and Virginia.

Connecticut Senate Bill No. 452

While Connecticut had an endorsed curriculum starting in 1987, it was not until 2018 that Holocaust and genocide education was actually mandated. During the February 2018 session of the Connecticut General Assembly, Senate Bill No. 452 (2018) “An Act Concerning the Inclusion of Holocaust and Genocide Education and Awareness in the Social Studies Curriculum” was raised. The proposed mandate was that for the school year commencing on July 1, 2018 and each year after, each Connecticut board of education will include Holocaust and genocide education and awareness as part of the social studies curriculum. Local or regional school boards may also accept gifts, grants, and donations for the development and

implementation of Holocaust and genocide education and awareness. On March 7, 2018, the bill was referred to the Joint Committee on Education and on March 9, 2018, a public hearing was held where both testimony in support of the bill and in opposition to it, was presented to the Education Committee. While many individuals and representatives of organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), Voices of Hope, and Jewish Federation Association of Connecticut (JFACT) gave testimony encouraging the passing of the mandate, organizations such as the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities (CCM), and Connecticut Association of Public Schools (CAPSS) raised concerns over the requirements of the mandate. CCM was concerned that “new curriculum mandates on local and regional boards of education [would] further minimize instruction time and may require additional resources.” Additionally, they wrote, “While the bill allows for the use of existing public or private materials, personnel and other resources, and allows local or regional boards of education to accept gifts, grants and donations to assist in the development of the curriculum, these opportunities may not always be available” (CCM, 2018). The concerns raised by CCM were not in opposition to learning about the Holocaust and genocide; rather, the concerns raised were with regards to instruction time and resources. Although there was no direct cost mentioned, CCM was worried because gifts, grants, and donations might not always be available. However, after the fiscal analysis was done, there was no perceived cost to districts.

Likewise, CAPSS also was not opposed to teaching about the Holocaust and genocide but was opposed to mandate the inclusion of Holocaust and genocide education in a social studies curriculum. Their belief was that the education should not only take place in social studies but also in English, art, and music classes as well (CAPSS, 2018).

After the public hearing, the mandate was referred to the Office of Legislative Research and the Office of Fiscal Analysis. These offices decided that, “After reviewing additional sources, it appears there are foundation dollars and non-profit organizations that will cover any costs for distribution and printing of materials for local and regional school districts. Should all districts choose to take advantage of these resources there would be no cost” (Office of Fiscal Analysis, 2018). It then went to the Senate and passed unanimously after about two weeks. It also passed in the House unanimously and was signed by then-Governor Dannel Malloy on May 10, 2018. The mandate went into effect on July 1, 2018.

Why Pass a Mandate?

During the interviews that were conducted, one question that was asked of every participant was “Why is Holocaust education important?” In an interview with a Holocaust education advocate, he believed that there were two components students needed: a basic understanding that is developmentally appropriate and context of how the Holocaust took place and the environment in which it took place. He said,

Those two elements, in my opinion, are the building blocks of what you’re really trying to do, is to create an empathic citizenry, to create an informed citizenry, and to create an empowered citizenry, where students not just hear something, not just understand the context from which it came from but know that they have the ability to make a difference going forward.

This is similar to UNESCO, where students see the fragility of the environment and are able to deepen contemporary reflection through informed citizenry. A legislator who worked on the passing of the bill also mentioned how learning about the Holocaust “demonstrates dangers of antisemitism.” She elaborated,

Well, I think that one of the unfortunate things that seems to be occurring is that there seems to be a greater number of antisemitic actions within the state of Connecticut and actually nation-wide, and some would even further say that it's also internationally an issue in Europe in particular. But I found that here, just in our part of the seven or eight towns that I'm familiar with here in my county, having represented them over ten years and longer, there were certain instances in both our schools and in the community that raised alarm. And there were either swastikas being drawn, there were notes being given, there were all sorts of things that caused quite a bit of concern and alarm. And when speaking to some students, it appeared that they didn't have any idea that something like a Holocaust actually occurred and it's such a huge part of our history that it really brought this issue back to life.

Her concern was that students needed to learn this history in order to contextualize antisemitism and the extreme that it could be taken to. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), antisemitic incidents have increased by about 37 percent between 2016 and 2017. Most recently, in 2017 Jewish people and Jewish institutions were the most frequent targets of hate crime, accounting for 58.1 percent of religious-based hate crime incidents. The second most frequent attacks were anti-Islamic (Muslim) accounting for 18.7 percent of all hate crimes. In studying the "ten steps to genocide," the first step is "Classification" where people are divided into an us versus them mentality and differences are not respected. Antisemitic actions clearly show a lack of esteem and appreciation for other people, which could lead to extermination of that religious group or others. An additional reason that was given during interviews but not listed by UNESCO as to why students should study the Holocaust is to keep the memory of survivors

alive and remember what happened. A Holocaust education advocate from a Jewish organization said learning about Holocaust was important to him for multiple reasons,

One is to keep the memory alive of never again. You have two factors here on both ends of the age spectrum. One, you have survivors dying and survivors are only going to be around a few more years and you are seeing... so we need to figure out a way to keep this memory alive because again survivors are dying off. And yet, there are organizations out there, second-generation survivor organizations that are keeping the memory of their parent's story alive, but it's not quite as effective as hearing from a survivor in person. And you are seeing, *The Washington Post* did a survey, I want to say in April, I mean they didn't do the survey; they posted a story about a survey where I think 66% of Millennials don't know what Auschwitz was and there's just a huge gap in knowledge about the Holocaust. So, between survivors dying off and the younger generation not knowing about it, getting an education in front of students is more important than ever.

I believe that this connection of memory and Holocaust education is a more Jewish perspective to take as about three-quarters (73%) of American Jews say that remembering the Holocaust is an essential part of being Jewish (Alper, 2015). Much of Judaism is centered around the conception of memory such as the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8) and holidays (Passover commemorating Jewish liberation from Egypt, Chanukah commemorating the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, Purim which commemorates the saving of the Jewish people from destruction).

According to USHMM, there are over 195,000 accounted-for survivors defined as "any persons, Jewish or non-Jewish, who were displaced, persecuted, or discriminated against due to the racial, religious, ethnic, and political policies of the Nazis and their allies between 1933 and

1945. In addition to former inmates of concentration camps, ghettos, and prisons, this definition includes, among others, people who were refugees or were in hiding” (2019). As survivors age out, there is the fear that students might forget because they don’t have the personal or firsthand account. Another educator believes that it is important for Holocaust education because

I think that these events are so important and so horrific in the history of modern Europe and when we get into genocide, the modern world, that it’s impossible to think that kids wouldn’t be aware of these. That kids wouldn’t know where society could go if things go - what people can do to each other, that’s it’s very important that kids be aware of these events and also, I think that kids should be aware that these - I think sometimes that even kids that know about the Holocaust see the Holocaust as some event that happened in the past and it’s all over, Hitler’s dead, so there’s nothing to worry about....

It is important as survivors die that students realize the Holocaust is not just a thing of the past. It has an impact on events even leading up until today where many issues raised continue to influence our lives. Countries pledged to prevent and gave a name to the term genocide, international human rights expanded, refugee protections were broadened, Judeo-Christian relationships strengthened, and the idea of a homeland for Jews gained urgency.

Concerns of SB No. 452

There are a few concerns of SB 452 that have been voiced since the passing in 2018. The largest concerns are that the study has to be included in a social studies curriculum, the study is yet another mandate by the state, and there is no required length of time to be spent on the Holocaust. As the language of the mandate specifies the education must be in “part of the social studies curriculum for the school district,” there is the critique and concern that the bill might not be taught in other capacities. In talking with educators and instructors, it appears as though for

many students, the first way that they are introduced to the Holocaust is through English or art classes. These subjects can oftentimes have fictional accounts and narratives, rather than facts of the Holocaust that would be taught in a social studies curriculum. There is a fear that because of the social studies component that teachers might not continue to teach it across the board and might only teach it in social studies, leading to loss of knowledge of the subject since students won't be exposed at a young age to appropriate Holocaust resources. Having the Holocaust taught in a social studies curriculum is beneficial for a few reasons; the first, there is an actual focus on the content and context versus an English class which might focus on the literature or writing. Another reason that the Holocaust should be taught in a social studies capacity is because learning about history allows for a better understanding of how these actions could have taken place. Rather than just learning about individual accounts through literature, the Holocaust is seen as an actual event that occurred.

Another criticism of Senate Bill No. 452 is that it is yet *another* mandate by the state. There is disapproval expressed as it appears as though more requirements are being crammed into what is only 180 days of school. Similarly, it is possible that teachers might not spend that much time on the Holocaust so that they can comply with the letter of the mandate (but not the spirit of the mandate). As there is no required length of time to be spent teaching, a teacher could simply watch a ten-minute video and say that he or she followed the mandate.

Discussion of Criticisms

Teachers should assume responsibility for combating these criticisms by being made aware that they can continue, and are encouraged, to teach in both social studies and other subjects. It does not need to be one subject, or the other and multiple mediums can be encouraged. Educators should also include the Holocaust in their social studies curriculum so

that teaching is based on factual evidences as opposed to fiction writing or poetry. This gives the subject more legitimacy and value. Furthermore, teachers should be encouraged to spend multiple class periods if not an entire year dedicated to the Holocaust and/or genocide awareness as these are not subjects that can be easily understood in a single class period. While it is difficult to comply with other mandates into a 180 school-day, it is important to dedicate the time.

Following Up SB No. 452

Since the bill was passed, there have been several structures created to help educators teach students about the Holocaust. The Connecticut Holocaust Education and Genocide Advisory Committee was formed by Voices of Hope in collaboration with the Connecticut State Department of Education to help plan for and implement the new curriculum. The autonomous and voluntary committee includes about 30 members including staff from Voices of Hope, JFACT, ADL, state representatives, and university professors. In August 2018, the committee facilitated workshops on teaching the Holocaust and genocide to around 100 educators in the state of Connecticut. In addition to physical workshops, Voices of Hope is working to create online seminars (Dresner, 2018).

Additionally, the Connecticut State Department of Education has also created a website featuring online resources, community resources, book and film recommendations, speaker's bureau, and museum trips. Free resources for teachers are available in the case that funding can no longer be provided by visiting <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Publications/Teaching-the-Holocaust/Online-resource-guide-by-subject>.

Conclusion

Although Holocaust education began by only being taught in Jewish day schools, it soon evolved into a worldwide phenomenon. The passing of the recent mandate in the state of

Connecticut implies that Holocaust and genocide education are important for several reasons: to combat a recent increase in antisemitism and hate crimes, to learn about historical mass violations of human rights, and to foster engaged and informed citizens. Administrators should realize that mandating Holocaust and genocide education is at no additional costs to schools, cities, or states. If teachers want to impact future generations and make a difference in the world, teaching them about the Holocaust and genocides allows for students to see what happens when rights are violated and impacted in a negative way. Other states should continue to follow Connecticut with their own legislation such as Massachusetts proposing Bill H.566.

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