

Remarks

Dr. Naomi Rodriguez

Good morning, Chair Argall and members of the Majority Policy Committee. My name is Dr. Naomi Rodriguez. I am a Jewish parent, educator, and researcher in the Greater Philadelphia Area. I am honored to be here today.

First, I am here as a private citizen to share my perspective on an issue of public concern: antisemitism in public schools. I do not speak for any school or organization where I work, nor do my remarks today reflect on them, instead these are based on my years of research and advocacy.

October 7th was not the beginning of the hatred Jewish families face today. It only revealed it. That hatred has quietly taken root in many of our Social Studies and English Language Arts classrooms for over a decade, since digital learning opened the floodgates of malinformation about Jews. This problem isn't isolated to the few districts with Jewish families to speak up. In fact, no school district in Pennsylvania, or in this country, is untouched. A loud anti-Jewish minority of activist educators brought us here today, but I believe most educators simply do not know better.

Pennsylvania has no certification for Middle East or Holocaust studies, yet our middle and high schools teach both. The stories of Anne Frank and Elie Wiesel, may their memories be a blessing, are taught by teachers who often know little about the Jewish people, to children who, in many cases, have never met a Jew. For many of those children, these lessons are all they will ever know about us. That we are from Europe. That we are white. That we are victims. But that is only one chapter of our story.

Much of what else reaches them is unvetted. Learning management systems like Canvas let teachers nationwide share content they create themselves. One test question, shared to the platform by a Utah teacher six years ago and accessed here in Pennsylvania by a high school social studies teacher, my neighbor, showed a photo of Hasidic Jews and asked: how many Jews are left in the world. One of the answer choices was "Too Many."

Broadly utilized curriculum organizations are part of this problem, too. NewsELA, to its credit, is now replacing content that erased Jews of color and distorted Jewish history in the Middle East. Unfortunately, Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change, the organizations behind the Zinn Education Project, have dug in. They openly spread blood libel against Jews and recast both Holocaust refugees, like my grandparents, and Jews of color expelled from Arab and North African countries, as white colonizers. No wonder so many students feel comfortable openly hating their Jewish classmates. They are being taught that WE are the oppressors.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education has no way to measure the harm. Administrators are required to sort the victims of incidents by census race categories. There is no code for Jew. So a swastika is coded as graffiti, and a student saying “Hitler should have finished the job” may get coded as “all other forms of harassment”, instead of ethnic intimidation. That’s assuming they report it at all. If our Department of Education can’t see the unprecedented levels of hate our Jewish students face today in their data, no one is solving the problem.

If there is a mechanism for ensuring schools report incidents in the first place, it isn’t working. In the 2024–25 school year, 68 percent of reported incidents were filed under “school code of conduct,” a category for minor infractions like chewing gum, which happen so often that no teacher has time to report them. Nearly 40 percent of districts and 70 percent of charter schools claimed zero bullying incidents that year. Do you believe ALL of them? I don’t.

School district decision makers, untrained in recognizing antisemitism as it presents today: anti-Jewish hate disguised as politics, amplify this problem. There is no incentive for administrators to check their own bias. In fact, they are protected by unfettered access to millions of taxpayer dollars to pay the legal fees most parents can’t afford. Even parents like me, who know the system, get crushed.

Isn’t there recourse? Sure, we have Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, and agencies to enforce it: the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission and the Office for Civil Rights. But they take years to act. Our students graduate before they see justice and justice delayed is justice denied.

The result? Many of us don't report the incidents of hate we experience, it's not worth the inevitable retaliation or the fight. What you think you know today about the Jewish community's experience barely scratches the surface.

We are at an inflection point. The systems that govern our schools are broken, and that harms every student. But for Jewish students and educators, the harm is compounded, because the solution to the hate we face has become trapped in partisan warfare. Too many lawmakers and leaders are afraid to speak up against antisemitism for fear that doing so will invite retaliation from constituents who have become increasingly extremist. Others fold our pain into unrelated political priorities. I am grateful to this committee for keeping the focus on Jewish students today. We need every elected official, Republican and Democrat alike, to do the same. Thank you for undertaking this critical work.