



**Testimony in SUPPORT of *House Bill 1370–
Montgomery County Public Schools - School Personnel Training -
Religious Discrimination Prevention MC 22-24***
Ways and Means Committee
February 26, 2024

The Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington (JCRC) is pleased to submit this testimony in support of Bill 1370 which requires Montgomery County Public Schools to provide personnel training on the prevention of antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of religious discrimination.

About the JCRC of Greater Washington and its work in local schools

The JCRC is the public affairs arm of greater Washington, DC's organized Jewish community, representing over 100 synagogues, community centers, and social service agencies throughout DC, Maryland, and Virginia. Since its inception in 1938, the JCRC has advocated on issues promoting rights and protections for Jewish Americans and for all people regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or other identity. We combat antisemitism and other forms of hatred through Holocaust education and commemoration, government affairs engagement, and interfaith coalition efforts. And we champion the cause of the most vulnerable members of our society, through advocacy for our network of non-sectarian Jewish social service agencies, interfaith and intergroup outreach, and other legislative and grassroots initiatives.

The JCRC's robust education outreach and programming department engages with 10 separate public-school districts and hundreds of private schools throughout the greater Washington D.C. region. The department's mission is to combat school-based antisemitism; advocate on behalf of Jewish students, families, and employees; and promote safe, hate-free, respectful learning environments for all students. Our approach, which encompasses advocacy, incident response and intervention, professional development, curriculum consultation, student education and empowerment, and parent engagement, reaches all stakeholders in our local school systems.

In Montgomery County, the JCRC is deeply engaged not only in combatting school-based antisemitism, but in addressing all forms of academic inequity. We strongly believe that our public schools must provide all children with the opportunity to realize their full

potential. To that end, the JCRC has strongly supported MCPS' anti-racist audit, and our Director of Intergroup Relations, Rabbi Abbi Sharofsky, sits on the audit's steering committee. Our agency is also a proud member of the Black and Brown Coalition for Educational Equity and Excellence, and we work closely with Identity, Inc., a Coalition co-founder, on initiatives to support MCPS' Latino youth.

The crisis of school-based antisemitism

Dramatic spikes in antisemitism over the last several years have been well-documented and show no signs of abating. Indeed, this trend has only intensified since Hamas' October 7th attack on Israel and the ensuing, ongoing war, resulting in an unprecedented and nearly unfathomable 361% increase in antisemitic incidents compared to the same period one year prior.

A significant portion of those incidents, from vandalism to bullying to discrimination, have occurred in K-12 educational settings, which have become "ground zero" for the polarization, culturally based conflict, and graphic hatred manifested in society at large. Even before October 7th, FBI data revealed that 10% of all reported hate crimes occurred on school or college campuses, and that 30% of all juvenile victims of hate crimes were targeted at their schools. Hate crimes rooted in antisemitism were the second highest in number, with anti-Black crimes being the most prevalent. Of course, these statistics do not reflect the enormous number of antisemitic incidents that do not rise to the level of being categorized as hate crimes, but which nevertheless cause untold harm to Jewish students and to entire school communities.

School systems nationwide and in our region have been poorly equipped to respond proactively to this burgeoning crisis. School administrators and teachers often have limited familiarity with antisemitism, and the unique ways in which it manifests, and little cultural competency about Jewish ethnicity, Jewish practice, and the critical importance of Israel to the Jewish identities of an overwhelming majority of American Jews. While training opportunities have existed for Holocaust and general anti-bias training, very little professional development was done specifically about antisemitism, Judaism, and Jewish identity.

JCRC's current teacher training efforts within MCPS, independently and in partnership with the ADL

The JCRC has developed an ever-expanding roster of teacher training opportunities for educators throughout the DMV. Most critically, the JCRC has partnered with the ADL's DC regional office to develop a comprehensive 3-hour training on antisemitism, anti-Zionism, and Jewish identity that has been presented to over 2,000 educators regionwide, including 1,400 MCPS personnel. The training is typically, though not always, mandatory and includes three components: core education about Judaism, the Jewish people, antisemitism and anti-Zionism; a session with the JCRC's Student to Student high school peer educators, who share their beliefs, traditions, and experiences as Jewish teens; and breakout workshop-type discussions where participants grapple with real-life scenarios.

We deeply value our ongoing partnership with ADL, which among many other benefits allows us to maximize our agencies' resources for the benefit of the larger community. During the last three months, when school-based antisemitic incidents were occurring on a near-daily basis, our respective education outreach professionals coordinated on a weekly basis to provide educational resources and opportunities to parents and teachers, and to support Jewish teens dealing with post-October 7th trauma and increased tensions and antisemitic harassment at school.

In addition to our work with the ADL, the JCRC provides customized training opportunities for targeted groups within MCPS. Recent examples include: a training for Central Office restorative justice and mental health professionals that included a component on the impact of intergenerational trauma on Jewish students and faculty; a session co-led by the JCRC and AJC's DC chapter for faculty at Bradley Hills Elementary School, which had experienced a troubling antisemitic incident, focused specifically on understanding post-October 7th antisemitism among younger students; and antisemitism workshops for several PTAs in clusters experiencing significant antisemitism challenges.

MCPS itself also offers its faculty a range of training opportunities provided by outside organizations, a discreet few of which are mandatory and others of which are optional. The JCRC provides a wide range of resources to educators, and also offers consultation where needed, and our staff work closely with Central Office curriculum coordinators.

The need for mandatory teacher training

The JCRC and ADL are pleased to have reached over 1,000 MCPS educators through our joint training. That, however, is only a fraction of the number of professionals engaged in educating and caring for our children every day throughout Montgomery County. The JCRC strongly believes that all teachers and other school personnel should have a baseline competency in the forms of hatred that are significantly manifesting in our schools at this time, both those that are religiously based and otherwise. That includes Islamophobia, xenophobia, anti-Asian hatred, homophobia, transphobia, and racism. Standardized mandatory training would foster a minimum baseline of recognition, familiarity, and competency across MCPS regarding antisemitism (and Islamophobia and other forms of religiously based discrimination as well), thereby providing an improved foundation for responding to antisemitic incidents swiftly and effectively when they occur. Such a mandate would also create greater accountability, and signal to MCPS' stakeholders that combating antisemitism must be a priority rather than an afterthought or optional interest. To be sure, this required skills development should be a floor, and not a ceiling: completion of mandatory generalized training should not diminish the necessity of more in-depth trainings such as those provided by JCRC, ADL, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and others.

It is impossible to disrupt what feels like an endlessly repeating cycle of antisemitic incidents without first ensuring that school leaders and teachers are themselves well-

equipped and motivated to address these difficult issues. MC22-24 is an expression of our community's commitment to responding forcefully, consistently, and sensitively to a problem that has only continued to worsen over recent months and years, and which undermines the very fabric of our society. It is also a commitment to ensuring that our schools reflect the very best values that we wish to instill in future generations of Montgomery County leaders.

For these reasons we urge a favorable report for House Bill 1370.