

# INITIAL FINDINGS AND PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE MASSACHUSETTS SPECIAL COMMISSION ON COMBATING ANTISEMITISM FOR K-12 EDUCATION IN MASSACHUSETTS

## *Working Document*

### MSCCA K-12 INITIAL FINDINGS

1. Antisemitism in Massachusetts K-12 public schools is a pervasive and escalating problem, with a large number of reported incidents of hate, bullying, harassment and discrimination experienced by families and teachers. There has been a stark escalation of incidents in recent years, especially after the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. Many Jewish students in Massachusetts schools are scared to publicly display their Judaism or let others know they are Jewish for fear of disparate treatment or bullying.<sup>1</sup>
2. Antisemitic hate crimes in Massachusetts are rising – by over 20% in 2024 alone – at the same time as overall violent crime is decreasing in the Commonwealth.<sup>2</sup>
3. Antisemitism is a unique type of hate that takes various forms and manifests in a variety of ways in Massachusetts K-12 schools.<sup>3</sup> These include, but are not limited to, swastika graffiti, Holocaust jokes or denial, harassment or discrimination based on perceived relationship to Israel or actual Israeli citizenship, and harassment directed towards Jewish individuals while using the term “Zionist” as a replacement slur.<sup>4</sup>
4. Antisemitic incidents and the more pervasive climate of antisemitism are causing serious harm to the mental health of Jewish and/or Israeli students and families.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See ADL, Audit of Antisemitic Incidents in 2024, <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/audit-antisemitic-incidents-2024> (Apr. 22, 2025); See also *First Hearing of the Special Comm’n on Combating Antisemitism* (Oct. 29, 2024) (statement of Melissa Garlick, Associate Vice President, CJP’s Center for Combating Antisemitism at 1:42:35); *Fourth Hearing of the Special Comm’n on Combating Antisemitism* (Feb. 10, 2025) (statement of Katherine Craven, Chair of Mass. Board of Elementary and Secondary Education at 2:58:08); *Fifth Hearing of the Special Comm’n on Combating Antisemitism* (Mar. 11, 2025) (statement of Molly Parr, First VP Jewish Federation of Western Massachusetts at 2:56:20).

<sup>2</sup> The Boston Globe, *Violent Crime Went Down Last Year in Mass., but Anti-Jewish Hate Crimes Spiked, Officials Say*, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2025/07/01/metro/violent-crime-down-mass-hate-crime-anti-jewish-incidents-up/> (July 1, 2025).

<sup>3</sup> See *Fifth Hearing of the Special Comm’n on Combating Antisemitism* (Mar. 11, 2025) (statement of Rabbi Amy Wallk at 0:59:05); *Fifth Hearing of the Special Comm’n on Combating Antisemitism* (Mar. 11, 2025) (statement of Rabbi Ariella Rosen at 3:45:10).

<sup>4</sup> See Facing History and Ourselves, *Explainer: Antisemitism and Its Impacts*, [https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/202402/Explainer\\_Antisemitism\\_and\\_Its\\_Impacts\\_1.pdf](https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/202402/Explainer_Antisemitism_and_Its_Impacts_1.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> See *Second Hearing of the Special Comm’n on Combating Antisemitism* (Nov. 19, 2024) (statement of Jessica Goldberg, School Counselor at 2:39:34); *Third Hearing of the Special Comm’n on*

5. Antisemitic incidents and hate crimes in the Massachusetts K-12 school environment are likely to be significantly underreported. Many school districts and schools do not provide teachers and staff with clear instructions as to when and how they should report potential hate or bias incidents of all types, including antisemitic incidents. The Commonwealth lacks a centralized mechanism for compiling and tracking such incidents. Many victims of antisemitic incidents do not report cases due to fear of retaliation and harassment or the sense that reporting an incident will not lead to any response by the school.<sup>6</sup>
6. Since October 7th, 2023, antisemitic speech and harassment in Massachusetts K-12 settings has had a particularly serious impact on Israeli-American students, families and teachers, as well as many Jewish students, families and teachers who have not lived in Israel but who have a personal or religious connection to the State of Israel.<sup>7</sup>
7. Programs for students, staff, and educators on combating hate and bias often neglect to include antisemitism as a form of bias and, as a consequence, fail to address it as a legitimate issue.<sup>8</sup> This is true even in school districts that have a demonstrated pattern of antisemitic incidents.
8. There is a lack of understanding among some K-12 educators and administrators in Massachusetts as to what forms of speech and expression constitute antisemitism and should therefore be subject to or prohibited under school codes of conduct, anti-harassment, anti-discrimination, and anti-bullying policies.<sup>9</sup>
9. There is a hesitancy in many schools across the Commonwealth to address antisemitism, both proactively through education and reactively when it occurs, that stems from a variety of factors. These include a lack of understanding around what types of speech are harmful to Jewish students and staff including the impact of such speech, a perception that proactive education is only necessary in communities with prominent Jewish

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*Combating Antisemitism* (Jan. 23, 2025) (statement of Dr. Miri Bar-Halperin at 2:33:40); *Fourth Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Feb. 10, 2025) (statement of Katherine Craven at 2:59:00).

<sup>6</sup> See *First Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Oct. 29, 2024) (statement of Peggy Shukur, Vice President of the East Division of ADL at 1:15:22).

<sup>7</sup> See *Third Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Jan. 23, 2025) (statement of Dr. Miri Bar-Halperin at 2:48:32); *Second Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Nov. 19, 2024) (statement of Debbie Coltin, Executive Director of Lappin Foundation at 2:48:17); *Fifth Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Mar. 11, 2025) (statement of Rabbi Amy Wallk at 0:49:27).

<sup>8</sup> See *Third Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Jan. 23, 2025) (statement of Dr. Miri Bar-Halperin at 2:52:57).

<sup>9</sup> See *Second Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Nov. 19, 2024) (statement of Acton-Boxborough Regional School District Superintendent Peter Light at 0:26:14).

populations, and a lack of familiarity with the programs and resources available to support efforts to combating antisemitism.<sup>10</sup>

10. There is inconsistency in responses from districts when antisemitic incidents or concerns of antisemitism are raised and no wide availability of best practices for Massachusetts schools. As a result, some districts respond ineffectively, and others fail to respond at all.<sup>11</sup>
11. Massachusetts public school students have reported being exposed to content and curriculum that contains inaccurate, decontextualized, and harmful material around Israel and the Jewish people. Massachusetts public school educators have reported that similar problematic content or resources have been endorsed or promoted through the Massachusetts Teachers Association and professional development opportunities.<sup>12</sup>
12. The Commonwealth, through the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), has limited visibility into the curricular materials and programs utilized by individual districts to teach about antisemitism, Jewish history, and Jewish identity. As a result, neither DESE nor this Commission knows what curriculum materials each local district and school uses to address antisemitism and issues relating to the history of Jews and Israel.<sup>13</sup>
13. DESE has issued rubrics that establish basic standards relating to curricula on the history of Israel. DESE plans to issue a rubric in the fall of 2025 to establish basic standards relating to classroom education on the topic of antisemitism itself. However, there are significant limitations on DESE's authority to require a school district to use or cease using particular curricula and classroom materials.<sup>14</sup> There are also limits on DESE's ability to address or investigate reports of antisemitism that are reported to it.

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<sup>10</sup> See ADL, *Antisemitism in Schools and Support for Holocaust Education*, <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/antisemitism-schools-and-support-holocaust-education> (Dec. 23, 2024).

<sup>11</sup> See *Second Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Nov. 19, 2024) (statement of Superintendent Peter Light at 0:28:09); *Second Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Nov. 19, 2024) (statement of Maddie Katzen, UMass Lowell student at 0:49:50); *Second Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Nov. 19, 2024) (statement of Rabbi Noach Kosofsky at 1:57:56).

<sup>12</sup> See MTA resources on Israel and Occupied Palestine here: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gLzllkhtAD1ki-UHbrfBcHM2IgzVDxn7/view?usp=sharing>; see also *Fourth Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Feb. 10, 2025) (statement of Katherine Craven, BESE chair at 3:02:47, 3:03:47); Boston Herald, *Stunned Massachusetts educators, ADL call for MassCUE apology after 'hateful' anti-Israel and Holocaust rhetoric at conference*, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2025/07/01/metro/violent-crime-down-mass-hate-crime-anti-jewish-incidents-up/> (Dec. 20, 2024).

<sup>13</sup> See *Fourth Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Feb. 10, 2025) (statement of Katherine Craven, BESE chair at 3:00:42, 3:01:23).

<sup>14</sup> See *Fifth Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Mar. 11, 2025) (statement of Dr. Russell Johnston, Acting Commissioner of DESE at 2:06:40).

14. In 2023-2024, DESE conducted a genocide education survey in part to monitor compliance with the Commonwealth's Genocide Education Mandate. The survey demonstrated a need for greater visibility into the implementation of the mandate across the Commonwealth, and suggested poor adherence to the law by school districts. DESE sent the survey to 187 of the Commonwealth's 389 districts. 58% of districts responded to the survey. Of the districts that responded, 76% provide genocide education through required courses, not only electives. Of those districts providing required genocide education courses, 89% teach about the Holocaust as part of that curriculum and 11% do not teach about the Holocaust.<sup>15</sup>

## MSCCA PRELIMINARY K-12 RECOMMENDATIONS

### **1) Measures to Increase Awareness and Understanding of Antisemitism, Including Threats to America, and Broaden Appreciation of Jewish American Heritage**

- a) The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) should establish an Advisory Council on Holocaust and Genocide Education to support schools in the implementation of the Genocide Education Mandate and to track its implementation.<sup>16</sup>
- b) In accordance with existing legislative requirements, DESE should develop model curricula and best practices/resources around teaching antisemitism and Jewish identity in schools, including through enhancements to its Frameworks. This may include Jewish history, positive Jewish contributions to America, Jewish diversity, and manifestations of contemporary antisemitism.<sup>17</sup>
- c) Schools should address antisemitism, extremism and antisemitic myths/tropes when teaching about digital literacy and misinformation/disinformation online.<sup>18</sup>
- d) Public school districts should institute mandatory anti-bias education for school committees and all K-12 faculty and administrators that includes antisemitism. The mandatory anti-bias education must include antisemitism education and

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<sup>15</sup> See *Fifth Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Mar. 11, 2025) (statement of Erin Hashimoto Martell, Associate Commissioner of DESE at 1:49:15).

<sup>16</sup> For a full list of BESE Advisory Councils, see <https://www.doe.mass.edu/bese/councils/>; cf. *Fourth Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Feb. 10, 2025) (statement of Katherine Craven, BESE chair at 3:14:44, 3:17:13).

<sup>17</sup> See U.S. National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism at 17, available at <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/U.S.-National-Strategy-to-Counter-Antisemitism.pdf>; see *Fifth Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Mar. 11, 2025) (statement of Rabbi Jodie Gordon at 0:22:16); *Fifth Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Mar. 11, 2025) (statement of Dr. Nicole Collins at 3:57:50).

<sup>18</sup> For examples of resources addressing antisemitic myths/tropes in online spaces see: Facing History and Ourselves, *Confronting Online Antisemitism*, <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/confronting-online-antisemitism>; ADL, *Antisemitism Uncovered*, <https://antisemitism.adl.org/>; *Third Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Jan. 23, 2025) (statement of Matt Williams, VP ADL's Center for Antisemitism Research at 0:29:05).

training<sup>19</sup> aligned with a DESE developed framework informed by the IHRA non-legally binding working definition of antisemitism with examples (which is the official working definition of the government of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts).<sup>20</sup>

- e) Schools and districts should work with community organizations to create and implement programming for Jewish American Heritage Month (JAHM)<sup>21</sup> each May to promote awareness and appreciation of Jewish contributions to American society, and to treat JAHM in an equivalent fashion to other history, identity and heritage months recognized by the schools throughout the year.
- f) The Commission calls upon the Association of Independent Schools New England to adopt similar recommendations for its schools in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

## **2) Measures to Improve Safety and Security for Jewish Communities**

- a) The Commonwealth should establish a statewide Bias Reporting Program that explicitly includes antisemitism as a form of bias. This program should encompass efforts to collect centralized hate crimes data, including efforts by the Mass. State Police Hate Crimes Awareness and Response Team (HART). Additionally, this program should collect data on bias incidents - which may not rise to the level of a hate crime - in all K-12 schools. DESE and the Attorney General's office should instruct all districts that every incident that might potentially constitute a case of bias, bullying, harassment or discrimination against individuals or groups of a protected class should be reported to this response program. The program should include annual public reporting by DESE of the number of reported incidents by category, as well as pertinent details (anonymized to protect privacy and personal identity).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For a state-based framework for mandatory anti-bias education inclusive of antisemitism, *see* [<sup>20</sup> The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Proclamation Endorsing the Working Definition of Antisemitism Established by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, Feb. 8, 2022, available at <https://www.mass.gov/doc/antisemitism-proclamation/download>.](https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgaweb/site/Legislation/Details/HB1386?ys=2024RS#:~:text=Requiring%20the%20State%20Department%20of,s):%20July%201%2C%202024; see also Fourth Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism (Feb. 10, 2025) (statement of Katherine Craven, BESE chair at 2:59:30).</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

<sup>21</sup> U.S. National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism at 19, available at <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/U.S.-National-Strategy-to-Counter-Antisemitism.pdf>; for a list of resources to support teaching about and celebrating JAHM *see* Jewish American Heritage Month, *Educator Resources*, <https://jewishamericanheritage.org/educator-resources/>.

<sup>22</sup> For Massachusetts DESE example *see* DESE Student Discipline Data Report, <https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/ssdr.aspx>; *see also First Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism (Oct. 29, 2024) (statement of Peggy Shukur, Vice President of the East Division of ADL at 1:15:22).*

- b) Schools and districts should expand access to culturally competent mental health resources for Jewish students targeted by antisemitic harassment or bullying.<sup>23</sup>
- c) School counseling departments should work to deepen their understanding of the effects of antisemitism on the mental health of Jewish young people and apply trauma informed interventions to incidents of antisemitism.<sup>24</sup>

### **3) Measures to Reverse the Normalization of Antisemitism and Counter Antisemitic Discrimination**

- a) Before the start of each school year, DESE and the Attorney General’s Office should circulate their “Guidance on School’s Legal Obligations to Prevent and Address Hate and Bias Incidents”<sup>25</sup> to all school districts. This guidance should explain the obligations of schools to prevent bias-related incidents and harassment by students and staff and how to respond effectively when it occurs as required by the Massachusetts Anti-Bullying Law (G.L. c 71 sec. 37O) and the Student Anti-Discrimination Act (G.L. c 76 sec. 5). The guidance should also make clear that the protections against harassment provided by the Student Anti-Discrimination Act are closely analogous to those provided by Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, though the Student Anti-Discrimination Act provides greater protections based on religion. DESE and the Attorney General’s Office should update this guidance annually informed by the IHRA non-legally binding working definition of antisemitism and the examples identified by that working definition (which is the official working definition of the government of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts) and any updates to Massachusetts law.
- b) DESE should issue guidance for Massachusetts public and private schools on creating safe and supportive school environments with respect to shared national origin, shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics similar to its existing guidance on Gender Identity and LGBTQ+ students.<sup>26</sup>
- c) School officials should adopt these best practices when communicating about antisemitic incidents and awareness, including:

<sup>23</sup> See Association of Jewish Psychologists, *Resources Menu and Downloadable Content*, <https://associationofjewishpsychologists.com/resources/#links>.

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., Miri Bar-Halpern and Jaclyn Wolfman, *Traumatic Invalidation in the Jewish Community after October 7*, *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*; Association of Jewish Psychologists Webinar, *Exploring the Psychological Toll of Antisemitism on Mental Health* (Feb. 27, 2024), available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7clRtE\\_eBmk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7clRtE_eBmk).

<sup>25</sup> For the Guidance on Schools’ Legal Obligations to Prevent and Address Hate and Bias Incidents, see <https://www.mass.gov/doc/guidance-on-schools-obligations-to-prevent-and-address-hate-incidents-september-2024/download>.

<sup>26</sup> For the DESE Principals for Ensuring Safe and Supportive Learning Environments for LGBTQ students, see <https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/lgbtq/Principles-SafeEnvironment.html>.

- i) School officials should make strong, clear statements that antisemitism is unacceptable and will not be tolerated, both at the start of each school year and regularly on other appropriate occasions, such as on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, January 27 of each year.<sup>27</sup>
- ii) When an antisemitic incident occurs, school officials, particularly superintendents and principals, should speak out clearly, forcefully, and with specificity as to the type of hate, rather than using vague language around all forms of hate.<sup>28</sup> Communication to the school community should be timely following an incident.
- iii) School administrators should communicate clearly and consistently to the entire school community (inclusive of the community in which the school is located), including all students and families, about school values and rules, including policies governing bullying, harassment, discrimination, protests, walkouts, postering, vandalism/graffiti, and social media. School administrators should make it clear that antisemitism falls under the umbrella of such values, rules and policies.
- d) DESE should coordinate with the Attorney General's office to make existing law, G.L. c 71 sec 82, around First Amendment considerations clear and readily available to schools.<sup>29</sup>
- e) At the start of each school year, DESE should remind districts of their obligation to teach curriculum that adheres to the frameworks and guidance issued by DESE.<sup>30</sup>
- f) DESE should develop a mechanism for reporting problematic curriculum in use in class including materials that promote bias, bigotry or discrimination against any person or group of persons on the basis of protected characteristics.<sup>31</sup>
- g) DESE should develop specific guidelines for classroom conduct and instruction that address fostering an inclusive, bias free classroom environment. These guidelines should be modeled after those created by the Massachusetts Association of School Committees<sup>32</sup> stating that classrooms:

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<sup>27</sup> See *Third Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Jan. 23, 2025) (statement of Jonathan Burke, Asst. Attorney General, Civil Rights Division at 0:40:50).

<sup>28</sup> See *Second Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Nov. 19, 2024) (statement of Superintendent Peter Light at 0:20:34).

<sup>29</sup> See *Third Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Jan. 23, 2025) (statement of Jonathan Burke, Asst. Attorney General, Civil Rights Division at 1:23:50).

<sup>30</sup> See *Third Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Jan. 23, 2025) (statement of Jonathan Burke, Asst. Attorney General, Civil Rights Division at 0:49:20).

<sup>31</sup> See *Fifth Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Mar. 11, 2025) (statement of Dr. Russell Johnston, Acting Commissioner of DESE at 2:38:18).

<sup>32</sup> See Massachusetts Association of School Committees, *Instructional Materials*, [https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/masterset/master/IJ/z2Code\\_IJ](https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/masterset/master/IJ/z2Code_IJ).

- i) Must present a range of unbiased views of international, national, and local issues and problems of the past, present and future.
  - ii) Must provide materials that stimulate growth in factual knowledge, literary appreciation, aesthetic and ethical values.
  - iii) Must help students develop abilities in critical reading and thinking.
  - iv) Must help develop and foster an appreciation of cultural diversity and development in the United States and throughout the world.
  - v) Must provide for all students an effective basic education that does not discriminate on the basis of race, age, color, religion, shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics, national origin, sex, gender identity, physical disabilities or sexual preference.
  - vi) Must allow sufficient flexibility for meeting the special needs of individual students and groups of students.
- h) Schools and districts should expand efforts to ensure kosher and halal foods are available to meet students' religious dietary needs.<sup>33</sup>

#### 4) Measures to Build Cross-Communal Solidarity and Collective Action to Counter Hate

- a) Schools should promote and invest in after-school programs and clubs that encourage multi-faith or cross-communal bonding through shared experiences.<sup>34</sup>
- b) Schools should leverage best practices for the US National Youth Sports Strategy to spotlight how activities like sports, fitness, dance, cooking, volunteering and more can build community solidarity to counter antisemitism and other forms of hate and ensure that such activities are not hostile environments for Jewish students.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> For Massachusetts district examples see Boston Public Schools, Halal and Kosher Meals, available at <https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/bps-departments/food-and-nutrition-services/halal-and-kosher-meals#:~:text=BPS%20offers%20halal%20and%20circle,available%20at%20your%20child%27s%20school>; Sharon Public Schools, Food and Nutrition Services, available at <https://sharon.healtheliving.net/>. For a statewide example, see Illinois first state to mandate availability of halal, kosher meals in schools, hospitals, prisons | WGN-TV; *Sixth Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Apr. 7, 2025) (statement of Ariella Hellman, Director of Government Affairs Agudath Israel of America, New England Office at 1:37:11).

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., Emerson College, *Youth Lead (Sharon, Mass.)*, available at <https://emerson.edu/social-justice-collaborative/elma-lewis-center/programs-projects/youth-lead>; Mosaic Interfaith Youth Action, <https://mosaicaction.org/our-programs/>; *Fifth Hearing of the Special Comm'n on Combating Antisemitism* (Mar. 11, 2025) (statement of Rabbi Jodie Gordon at 0:29:35).

<sup>35</sup> See Center for the Study of Sports in Society and Northeastern University, *Exploring Diverse Opportunities for Engagement and Empowerment*, available at <https://sportinsociety.sites.northeastern.edu/programs/>.