



Building Safer Schools: Addressing Antisemitism in American Education

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Antisemitism is one of the oldest forms of hatred, and in recent years it has become an increasingly visible problem within educational institutions. This brief examines how antisemitism manifests within the education system and evaluates targeted policy interventions to address it.

II. OVERVIEW

American educational institutions have become a troubling site of antisemitic activity, with Jewish students at both the high school and college level facing it as part of their daily experience. From overt acts of harassment to the spread of Holocaust denial in online spaces, Jewish students are increasingly navigating environments that threaten both their sense of safety and their ability to fully engage in academic life. The radicalization of youth through social media, combined with gaps and distortions in how Jewish history is taught, has allowed antisemitic ideas to spread among younger generations. This paper examines the ways in which antisemitism manifests across secondary and higher education, analyzes the structural and cultural factors that have allowed it to persist, and evaluates past and proposed policy efforts to address it, identifying what has shown promise, where previous approaches have fallen short, and what a more comprehensive framework might look like.

A. Relevance

Antisemitism among young people in the United States has seen a significant resurgence, with high school and college campuses among the most prevalent sites of this activity. The Anti-Defamation League has recorded a sharp rise in campus antisemitic incidents in recent years, reflecting a generation that is not only under-educated about Jewish history but actively exposed to antisemitic narratives through social media and peer influence. This gap in education has had measurable consequences: a 2020 Claims Conference survey found that 63% of American millennials and Gen Z could not identify that six million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, and 36% believed the number to be two million or fewer. These figures point to a failure within the educational system, one that has allowed dangerous misconceptions to spread. As Holocaust denial becomes increasingly normalized in online spaces and Jewish students face growing hostility on campuses with limited institutional recourse, the case for structured policy responses within education becomes clear.

III. HISTORY

A. Current Stances

While antisemitism has deep roots in the United States, its presence within educational institutions is a more recent and rapidly evolving concern.

Jewish students across high schools and universities are confronting environments in which antisemitic attitudes have become increasingly overt, ranging from vandalism and verbal harassment to coordinated campaigns of exclusion and intimidation. According to the Anti-Defamation League, incidents on college campuses reached a record 1,699 in 2022 alone, a 41% increase from the previous year, with Jewish students reporting feeling unsafe, unwelcome, and inadequately supported by their institutions. At the K-12 level, the picture is similarly concerning, with incidents rising sharply across the country.

What makes the educational setting particularly significant is the age at which exposure begins. High school students, many of whom are encountering discussions of Jewish identity, Israel, and the Holocaust for the first time, are simultaneously navigating social media platforms saturated with antisemitic content. A 2024 report by the News Literacy Project found that 80% of American teenagers reported being inclined to believe conspiracy theories they encounter online, and a 2025 report by the American Jewish Committee found that 85% of young Jews reported seeing antisemitic content online or on social media in the past year. Together, these findings suggest that many young people are encountering antisemitic narratives without the tools to critically evaluate them, creating conditions in which Holocaust denial, conspiracy theories, and the trivialization of Jewish suffering can take hold.

At the college level, the problem takes on additional dimensions. Jewish students report facing hostility not only from peers but from student organizations, campus political

movements, and in some cases faculty. The line between legitimate political discourse and antisemitic rhetoric is frequently blurred or crossed. A 2021 Brandeis University study found that 47% of Jewish college students had experienced antisemitism during their time on campus, and a significant portion reported that their university had failed to respond adequately. A 2025 American Jewish Committee report found that 32% of American Jewish college students reported experiencing antisemitism on campus, with 43% reporting that they concealed their views on Israel out of fear, reflecting not only the prevalence of hostility but its chilling effect on Jewish students' ability to participate openly in campus life.

Addressing antisemitism at the college level alone, however, is insufficient. By the time students arrive on campus, attitudes and biases are already largely formed. The values and understanding students carry into higher education are shaped primarily during their secondary school years, making high school the more critical point of intervention. Without meaningful action at that earlier stage, efforts at the college level will continue to address the problem too late.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

The primary stakeholders are Jewish students enrolled in secondary and higher education institutions across the United States. As the individuals most directly affected by antisemitic harassment, exclusion, and hostile campus environments, they have the greatest stake in policies governing how institutions identify, respond to, and prevent antisemitism. Jewish

students and their representative organizations should have meaningful input into the design and evaluation of these mechanisms to ensure they produce substantive outcomes rather than symbolic ones.

Educational institutions, including public school districts, universities, and their administrative bodies, are also central stakeholders. These institutions bear responsibility for maintaining safe learning environments, yet gaps in curriculum, enforcement, and institutional culture have allowed antisemitism to persist and, in many cases, go unaddressed. Holding these institutions accountable while equipping them with effective tools and frameworks is a central challenge for any policy response.

Finally, government bodies such as the Department of Education and its Office for Civil Rights are key stakeholders, as they set the federal standards under which institutions must operate and hold the authority to enforce compliance with anti-discrimination law, specifically Title VI of the Civil Rights Act.

B. Risks of Indifference

The risks of continued inaction on antisemitism in educational settings are significant. Holocaust denial and conspiracy theories have already spread among millennials and Gen Z at measurable rates, and without structured intervention, these trends are likely to continue.

At the institutional level, failure to act on reported incidents communicates to Jewish students that their safety and dignity are not institutional priorities. This erodes trust and discourages Jewish students from fully participating in

academic and campus life, a harm to both individuals and to the broader intellectual communities they are part of.

At a societal level, antisemitism has historically accompanied broader erosion of democratic norms, and the spread of extremist content among youth through unregulated online spaces presents a meaningful civic concern. Inaction does not simply allow one form of bias to persist, it signals to all students that discriminatory behavior falls within acceptable bounds.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Addressing antisemitism in educational institutions is not a partisan issue. It is a matter of student safety, institutional integrity, and civic health that carries consequences well beyond any single political constituency. The case for intervention rests on grounds that cut across ideological lines:

- 1) Educational equity and equal access to learning: Jewish students who face harassment, exclusion, or hostile campus environments are being denied the same educational experience available to their peers. When any student group must conceal their identity, avoid certain spaces, or disengage from academic life out of fear, the institution is failing its basic obligation to provide equal access to education. Ensuring that Jewish students can participate fully and openly in academic life is not a political position, it is a baseline standard of educational equity that applies regardless of which group is affected.
- 2) Institutional credibility and legal

compliance: Educational institutions that fail to adequately respond to documented antisemitic incidents face real legal exposure under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination based on shared ancestry and ethnic characteristics. Beyond legal risk, institutions that are seen as tolerating bias lose credibility with students, faculty, and the public. A consistent, transparent reporting and accountability framework protects institutions as much as it protects students, giving administrators clear standards to follow and reducing liability.

- 3) Civic and democratic foundations: A student population that cannot distinguish between legitimate political discourse and conspiracy-driven rhetoric, or that has significant gaps in its knowledge of historical atrocities, is less equipped for informed civic participation regardless of political affiliation. Holocaust education and media literacy are not ideological projects, they are investments in the kind of historically grounded, critically thinking citizenry that democratic governance depends on. The evidence that large portions of younger Americans cannot accurately identify basic facts about the Holocaust points to an educational gap with implications that extend well beyond Jewish communities.

V. TRIED POLICY

One approach schools have attempted is integrating antisemitism awareness into broader diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programming. DEI frameworks represent a

genuine institutional commitment to protecting minority students, and their expansion into K–12 and higher education settings has produced real progress in many areas. However, antisemitism presents a distinct challenge that these programs were not always designed to address. Because Jewish students are often perceived as a relatively privileged group, they have at times fallen outside the scope of protections DEI initiatives offer. The specific character of antisemitism, its reliance on conspiracy theories, its long historical arc, its modern mutations, does not map neatly onto the discrimination frameworks these programs typically employ. The result is a gap in application rather than a failure of intent.

A second approach has been state-level Holocaust education mandates. These represent meaningful progress but have faced implementation challenges. The ADL found that only 30% of K–12 parents reported their child's school offered Holocaust education, and only 21% had access to antisemitism education specifically, suggesting that even where mandates exist, consistent implementation has not followed. Beyond coverage, curricula that treat the Holocaust as an isolated historical event, rather than situating it within the longer arc of antisemitic ideology and connecting it to contemporary forms, leave students without the conceptual grounding needed to recognize or respond to the hatred they may encounter today. Legislation without depth of content and consistent enforcement produces limited change.

VI. POLICY OPTIONS

State-Mandated Holocaust and Antisemitism Education in Secondary Schools

Because attitudes and biases are largely formed before students arrive at college, secondary education represents the most critical point of intervention. Education policy falls under state jurisdiction, making individual states best positioned to mandate comprehensive, standards-aligned Holocaust and antisemitism education within public school curricula. A number of states have already moved in this direction, Florida, Illinois, and New York have each enacted Holocaust education requirements, but no consistent national standard exists, producing uneven outcomes depending on where a student happens to attend school. The most viable federal role is not to mandate curriculum directly but to incentivize state adoption through competitive grant programs and model curriculum frameworks, encouraging broader and more uniform uptake without overstepping constitutional limits on federal authority over education.

This is not a politically contested goal. ADL research found that 84% of U.S. adults support antisemitism education in their local school districts, and 89% support Holocaust education specifically, with 52% of parents believing it should be mandatory. Broad public support already exists; what is needed is the policy infrastructure to act on it.

Institutional Reporting and Accountability Frameworks

Currently, there is no uniform requirement for educational institutions to publicly report antisemitic incidents or document the responses taken, leaving Jewish students with limited recourse when their complaints go unaddressed. This gap is notable given the scale of the problem:

despite comprising roughly 2% of the U.S. population, Jews are the targets of nearly 70% of religion-based hate crimes year after year. A federal mandate requiring universities and school districts to track, report, and publish data on antisemitic incidents, along with the institutional responses taken, would create a baseline of public accountability that does not currently exist.

This approach has precedent. The Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009 expanded federal protections in response to documented, disproportionate targeting of specific groups. The same logic applies here. The Clery Act similarly establishes that the federal government is willing to condition institutional funding on transparency around campus safety. Expanding its reporting requirements to more explicitly capture bias-motivated incidents targeting Jewish students would build on an established, legally tested framework, administered through the Office for Civil Rights with compliance tied to continued eligibility for federal financial aid.

Digital Literacy and Counter-Radicalization Programming

Given that exposure to extremist content on social media is a significant driver of antisemitic attitudes among youth, schools should integrate structured media and digital literacy curricula that specifically address online radicalization, conspiracy theories, and the mechanics of antisemitic rhetoric. Partnerships between school districts and organizations such as the News Literacy Project or the ADL's education division could support the development and distribution of age-appropriate programming. The Department of Education could play a

coordinating role by publishing model frameworks and best practices that districts can adopt without federal overreach into local curriculum decisions.

CONCLUSIONS

This brief has examined the ways antisemitism manifests within American educational institutions, tracing contributing factors including inadequate curriculum, the spread of extremist content through social media, and structural failures that have allowed hostile environments to persist. Through an analysis of existing policies and proposed interventions, it is clear that incremental, piecemeal approaches have not been sufficient.

Of the options outlined, state-mandated Holocaust and antisemitism education at the secondary level, incentivized through federal grant programs and model curriculum frameworks, is the most immediately actionable and structurally significant. It targets the point where the evidence suggests intervention matters most, and it has the public support necessary to be politically viable.

That said, antisemitism in education is a multidimensional problem, and no single policy will resolve it. Meaningful and lasting progress will require institutional accountability, investment in digital literacy, and a consistent willingness to treat antisemitism as a distinct and serious issue rather than one that can be fully addressed through broader frameworks not designed with it in mind. The data makes clear that Jewish students are currently not able to participate fully and freely in academic life. Targeted policy, consistent institutional

follow-through, and more substantive educational programming would go a long way toward changing that.

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