

ANALYSIS & RECOMMENDATIONS:

MASSACHUSETTS SPECIAL COMMISSION'S INTERIM REPORT ON COMBATING ANTISEMITISM IN K-12 EDUCATION



ICAN is a legislative and political advocacy organization that unites Israelis and pro-Israel Americans at the state and local level to combat antisemitism and strengthen the U.S.-Israel alliance.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Massachusetts Special Commission on Combating Antisemitism for K-12 Education has released its initial findings and preliminary recommendations addressing the escalating crisis of antisemitism in Massachusetts public schools. This analysis examines the Commission's work, evaluates its recommendations, and identifies critical gaps that require additional policy attention, particularly regarding the protection of Israeli-American students and addressing Israel-related antisemitism.

COMBATING ANTISEMITISM IN
STATE & LOCAL GOVERNMENT



BACKGROUND ON THE MASSACHUSETTS SPECIAL COMMISSION

COMMISSION FORMATION AND PURPOSE

The Massachusetts Special Commission on Combating Antisemitism was established to investigate and address the growing problem of antisemitism in the Commonwealth's K-12 public education system. The Commission was formed in response to alarming increases in antisemitic incidents following the October 7, 2023, Hamas terrorist attack on Israel, though the problem predated these events.

COMMISSION PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY

The Commission conducted a series of public hearings between October 2024 and July 2025, gathering testimony from:

- Education officials, including the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education Chair
- School administrators and superintendents
- Students, parents, and families affected by antisemitic incidents
- Community organizations
- Mental health professionals and school counselors
- Jewish community leaders and advocacy organizations

The Commission also reviewed data from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), examined existing policies and procedures, and analyzed compliance with Massachusetts' Genocide Education Mandate.

KEY DATA POINTS FROM COMMISSION FINDINGS

- **Antisemitic hate crimes increased by over 20% in 2024:** while overall violent crime decreased in Massachusetts
- **Poor compliance with Holocaust education mandates:** Only 58% of surveyed districts responded to DESE's genocide education survey, and 11% of responding districts do not teach about the Holocaust despite legal requirements
- **Significant underreporting:** Many antisemitic incidents go unreported due to fear of retaliation and lack of clear reporting mechanisms
- **Systemic gaps:** Limited centralized tracking of bias incidents and inconsistent district responses

ANALYSIS OF COMMISSION FINDINGS

SCOPE AND SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

The Commission's findings reveal antisemitism in Massachusetts K-12 schools as both a pervasive and escalating crisis. The documentation of various forms of antisemitism—from swastika graffiti to Holocaust denial to harassment using "Zionist" as a slur—demonstrates the multifaceted nature of the problem.

Particularly significant is Finding #6, which identifies that "Israeli-American students, families and teachers" have experienced "particularly serious impact" since October 7th, along with "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." This finding acknowledges a specific vulnerability that requires targeted policy responses.

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE GAPS

The Commission identified several systemic failures:

- **Inconsistent district responses** to antisemitic incidents
- **Limited educator training** on recognizing and addressing antisemitism
- **Lack of clear guidance** on what constitutes antisemitic speech in educational settings

Insufficient oversight of curricular materials that may contain biased content about Jewish people and Israel

EDUCATIONAL AND CURRICULAR CONCERNs

Finding #11 specifically notes that Massachusetts public school students have been "exposed to content and curriculum that contains inaccurate, decontextualized, and harmful material around Israel and the Jewish people," with similar problematic content promoted through professional development opportunities.



NEXT: SUMMARY & ANALYSIS OF
COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS OF COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

The Commission organized its 22 preliminary recommendations into four categories:

CATEGORY 1: MEASURES TO INCREASE AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING OF ANTISEMITISM

Key Recommendations:

- Establish an Advisory Council on Holocaust and Genocide Education under BESE
- Develop model curricula and best practices for teaching about antisemitism and Jewish identity
- Institute mandatory anti-bias education for school committees and all K-12 faculty and administrators
- Create programming for Jewish American Heritage Month

Analysis: These recommendations provide a strong foundation for proactive education and awareness-building. The Advisory Council proposal offers sustainable institutional support, while mandatory training ensures systematic coverage. The recommendations will require specific implementation timelines and funding mechanisms.

CATEGORY 2: MEASURES TO IMPROVE SAFETY AND SECURITY FOR JEWISH COMMUNITIES

Key Recommendations:

- Establish a statewide Bias Reporting Program with centralized data collection
- Expand access to culturally competent mental health resources
- Deepen school counseling understanding of antisemitism's mental health impacts

Analysis: The centralized reporting system addresses a critical gap identified in the findings. The focus on mental health support recognizes the psychological impact of antisemitic harassment. However, the recommendations may benefit from more specific guidance on response protocols and support services.

CATEGORY 3: MEASURES TO REVERSE THE NORMALIZATION OF ANTISEMITISM

Key Recommendations:

- Annual circulation of legal guidance on schools' obligations to prevent bias incidents
- Develop guidance for creating safe environments based on shared national origin/ancestry
- Establish clear communication protocols for antisemitic incidents
- Create mechanisms for reporting problematic curriculum materials

Analysis: These recommendations directly address institutional responses and communication gaps. The emphasis on clear, specific communication about antisemitic incidents rather than "vague language around all forms of hate" is particularly important. The curriculum reporting mechanism responds to Finding #11 about biased educational materials.

CATEGORY 4: MEASURES TO BUILD CROSS-COMMUNAL SOLIDARITY

Key Recommendations:

- Promote after-school programs encouraging multi-faith bonding
- Leverage sports and activities to build community solidarity
- Expand kosher and halal food availability

Analysis: These recommendations focus on building positive community relationships and addressing practical needs for religious students.

OPPORTUNITIES TO STRENGTHEN COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

MISSING FOCUS ON ISRAELI-AMERICAN STUDENTS

Despite Finding #6 explicitly identifying the "particularly serious impact on Israeli-American students, families and teachers," **none of the 22 recommendations specifically address their protection or needs.**

This represents a significant policy gap given:

- The documented increase in Israel-related harassment since October 7th
- The use of "Zionist" as a replacement slur for targeting Jewish individuals
- The finding that harassment based on "perceived relationship to Israel or actual Israeli citizenship" is occurring in schools

The Commission's recommendation for Jewish American Heritage Month (JAHM) programming presents an opportunity to celebrate Israeli-American heritage specifically. The Commission should suggest specific content around JAHM training that includes Israeli cultural content, Israeli food traditions, the diverse experiences of Middle Eastern Jews, and the significant cultural contributions of Israeli-Americans to Massachusetts communities.

This targeted programming would help combat stereotypes while fostering understanding of Israeli-American identity as an integral part of the broader Jewish American experience.

STRENGTHENING THE GENOCIDE EDUCATION MANDATE

Massachusetts' Genocide Education Mandate requires instruction on the history of genocide but does not mandate Holocaust education specifically, leading to inconsistent implementation and, in some cases, omission of the Holocaust entirely. The Holocaust remains critically relevant today as we witness concerning parallels to pre-Holocaust conditions: rising antisemitism, normalization of hatred toward Jewish communities, and systematic efforts to delegitimize Jewish identity and connection to Israel. This lack of clarity in the mandate has allowed activist educators to misuse it by inserting politicized content—such as framing Israel's defensive war against Hamas as genocide—into classrooms through propagandistic teaching methods that abandon fact-based instruction. These approaches create hostile environments for Jewish and Israeli-American students while undermining educational integrity.

To safeguard the mandate's intent, the Commission should recommend clear instructional standards that keep genocide education historically grounded, elevate the Holocaust as a core component, and prevent contemporary political conflicts from being misrepresented as genocide. The Commission should require that school districts fulfill their state mandate through partnerships with Holocaust museums and memorial centers, which provide accurate, fact-based, and detailed information about the Holocaust. This requirement would ensure students receive proper Holocaust education while addressing concerns about teachers who might deny the Holocaust occurred or disseminate other historically inaccurate information.

INSUFFICIENT ATTENTION TO ISRAEL-RELATED CURRICULUM ISSUES

While Finding #11 identifies "inaccurate, decontextualized, and harmful material around Israel" in curricula, the recommendations focus primarily on general antisemitism education without addressing:

- Standards for balanced presentation of Israel in educational materials
- Training for educators on Israel-related topics
- Clear guidelines for when Israel-related criticism becomes antisemitic harassment

COMMISSION TIMELINE AND ONGOING ENGAGEMENT

The Massachusetts Special Commission on Combating Antisemitism was established with a specific mandate and timeline that affects the urgency and scope of policy recommendations. Understanding this timeline is crucial for stakeholders seeking to contribute to the Commission's final recommendations.

Commission Mandate and Timeline: The Commission is required to submit its report by November 30, 2025, according to the establishing legislation. This timeline provides the Commission with adequate time to conduct comprehensive hearings and gather input from diverse stakeholders across the Commonwealth.

Stakeholder Engagement Opportunities: As the Commission moves toward finalizing its recommendations, there remain opportunities for additional community input. ICAN has proposed that the Commission host a panel representing immigrant Jewish communities, particularly Israeli-Americans, Persian Jews, and Russian Jews. The immigrant Jewish experience has not been featured prominently in the Commission's hearings to date, despite these communities facing distinct challenges related to antisemitism and cultural discrimination in educational settings.

This proposed panel would provide the Commission with perspectives on:

- The unique vulnerabilities faced by immigrant Jewish students and families
- Cultural and linguistic barriers to reporting antisemitic incidents
- The intersection of national origin discrimination and antisemitism
- Community-specific approaches to education and cultural preservation

Including these voices would strengthen the Commission's understanding of antisemitism's diverse impacts across different Jewish communities and ensure that final recommendations address the full spectrum of affected populations.

RESOURCE AND IMPLEMENTATION NEXT STEPS

The recommendations would benefit from including the following implementation steps:

- Specific funding requirements and sources
- Implementation timelines beyond general annual requirements
- Success metrics and evaluation frameworks
- Pilot program structures for testing approaches

BEYOND K-12: ADDITIONAL EDUCATION-RELATED CONSIDERATIONS

While this draft report focuses specifically on K-12 education, the Commission's broader mandate to combat antisemitism throughout the Commonwealth encompasses additional areas of concern. Public facilities such as libraries and community centers play important roles in education and community life, serving K-12 students, teachers, families, and the broader public.

Public Facility Protections: The Commission should recommend that state and local public facilities, such as libraries, not engage in viewpoint discrimination when considering Jewish and Israel-related content. Documented instances of such discrimination have been observed, particularly regarding community programming and author events.

The process for hosting community events with authors is often not public, clear, or consistent, with facilities appearing to selectively approve content while blocking Jewish and Israeli-American programming they deem objectionable. The library in the City of Newton is one clear example of this concerning pattern.

Ensuring consistent protections and transparent, equitable processes across all public facilities would strengthen the comprehensive approach to combating antisemitism throughout Massachusetts communities.

POLICY ALIGNMENT WITH FEDERAL AND STATE INITIATIVES

The Commission's recommendations align with several broader policy frameworks:

Federal Strategy: The recommendations reference and build upon the U.S. National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism, providing state-level implementation of federal priorities around education, awareness, and community protection.

IHRA Definition Integration: The consistent reference to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism provides alignment with the Commonwealth's official 2022 proclamation endorsing this definition.

Constitutional Considerations: The recommendations navigate the legal framework where schools have broad authority to control curriculum and teacher conduct while ensuring that anti-harassment policies are sufficiently clear to avoid chilling protected student expression about political topics.

POLICY IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

RESOURCES AND IMPLEMENTATION

Successful implementation of the Commission's recommendations will require significant resources and coordination across multiple state agencies. Key considerations include:

Funding Mechanisms: The recommendations, while comprehensive, will need detailed cost estimates or identified funding sources. Implementation will likely require a combination of state appropriations, federal grants, and potentially private foundation support.

Training and Professional Development: The mandatory anti-bias education requirements will need sustained funding for initial training and ongoing professional development to ensure effective implementation across all Massachusetts school districts.

Technology and Data Systems: The proposed statewide Bias Reporting Program will require investment in data collection systems, analysis capabilities, and reporting infrastructure.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Enforcement Authority: The Commission acknowledges DESE's limited authority to require curriculum changes at the local level. Successful implementation may require legislative action to strengthen enforcement mechanisms while respecting local control traditions.

Consistency Across Districts: Massachusetts' decentralized education system presents challenges for ensuring uniform implementation. Rural and urban districts may face different capacity constraints and community dynamics.

Sustainability: Long-term success will depend on embedding these initiatives into standard operating procedures rather than treating them as temporary responses to current events.

NATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Massachusetts Commission's work represents one of the most comprehensive state-level approaches to addressing antisemitism in K-12 education. The findings and recommendations could serve as a model for other states facing similar challenges, particularly given the documented nationwide increase in antisemitic incidents following October 7th.

The Commission's focus on data collection, educator training, and systemic responses provides a framework that could be adapted to different state contexts while maintaining core protections for Jewish and Israeli-American students.

CONCLUSION

The Massachusetts Special Commission on Combating Antisemitism has produced a comprehensive analysis of antisemitism in K-12 education and a robust set of policy recommendations. However, critical gaps remain, particularly regarding the protection of Israeli-American students and addressing Israel-related antisemitism specifically identified in the Commission's findings.

These gaps represent important areas for future policy development. Addressing Israeli-American student protection and Israel-related curriculum issues would strengthen the comprehensive approach to combating antisemitism in education while ensuring all affected communities receive appropriate support.

The Commission's work provides a strong foundation for state-level antisemitism policy that could become a national model for protecting all students from antisemitic harassment and discrimination while ensuring balanced, factual education about complex global issues.

THANK YOU!

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END

Analysis & Recommendations - Interim Report on Combating Antisemitism in K-12 Education