



Government Relations • Israel Advocacy • Intergroup Relations •
Social Justice • Maryland • Virginia • Washington, DC •

Since 1938

Partner Agency of
The Jewish Federation
OF GREATER WASHINGTON



**Testimony of Rachel Feinstein | Director of DC Government and Community Relations | Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) of Greater Washington
Before the DC Council – Committee of the Whole
Regarding B25-0420, The Conflict Resolution Education Amendment Act
January 11, 2024**

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson and members of the Council and staff. Thank you for the opportunity today to provide comments on the Conflict Resolution Education Amendment Act. My name is Rachel Feinstein and I am the Director of DC Government and Community Relations with the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington, known as the JCRC. The JCRC is the public affairs arm of the organized Jewish community, representing over 100 synagogues, community centers, and social service agencies throughout DC, Maryland, and Virginia, including nearly 20 in the District alone.

We advocate on many issues that promote rights and protections for Jewish Americans and for all people regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or other identity. 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. Education outreach is a critical component of this work. An overwhelming majority of Jewish children in our region attend public schools; we work independently and in coalitions to ensure that schools are safe and welcoming for all students, and that all children have an equal opportunity to realize their full potential.

Based on our work with schools of all levels in DC, we applaud the goals of this bill, as conflict resolution education would not only be a tremendous benefit to DC schools seeking to reduce violence and bullying, but is also a valuable life skill for every student. The JCRC works with educators and school communities to address religious- and nationality-based harassment by students and teachers alike towards Jewish and Israeli students. In the last 18 months, JCRC has engaged intensively with at least two DC public schools to address conflicts between students, parents, and teachers regarding antisemitic incidents: Watkins Elementary School of Ward 6 and Jackson-Reed High School of Ward 3.

At Watkins Elementary School in December 2022, a librarian had third graders reenact concentration camp scenes from the Holocaust. This was extremely disturbing to students and parents and generated the need for difficult conversations on appropriate remediation. JCRC met with the school principal to review educational resources available to teachers and students and hosted a community webinar gathering with mental health experts from the Jewish Social Services Agency. JCRC led discussions on the webinar with parents on how to talk to children about the Holocaust at such a young age. At Jackson-Reed High School, since October 7, 2023, students and teachers have struggled with how to address antisemitic and nationality-based harassment of Jewish and Israeli students. School teachers and administrators are working hard to find the right strategies to address student actions that are harmful to fellow teens and

create deep division within the school. JCRC continues to work with school administrators, who are eager to find the right tools and resources to help their community.

In addition to JCRC's advocacy and collaboration with school and district administrators, interventions, our "Student to Student" teen peer education program brings together Jewish high school students to speak with non-Jewish peers about what it means to be Jewish, with the goal of dismantling antisemitism and facilitating meaningful dialogue between young people of different backgrounds.

Based on these incidents and other experiences, we know that conflict resolution education is needed. We recommend the following changes to this legislation.

Include language to require adequate educator training on teaching conflict resolution.

Conflict resolution and restorative justice education can play a powerful role in combatting bias and in helping young people peacefully resolve disagreements. However, the quality of the education is only as effective as the instructors administering the curriculum; educators must be well trained, and the curriculum must be implemented consistently across a school district.

We encourage policymakers to consider including language regarding educator training and that thought is given to the types of frameworks available in this space. For example, many, if not most, DEI and conflict resolution frameworks do not adequately include antisemitism and religious biases. [Legislation being considered in Pennsylvania](#) includes language requiring education on "respect for and awareness of different cultures, beliefs, religions, races, gender identities and sexual orientations, including empathy and compassion for others." It is important for a school district as diverse as the District's to include training on cultural competency.

Increase the role of local school advisory teams in curriculum development.

While we are happy to see that local school advisory teams (LSATs) are included in this program as an advisory role on whether school budgetary resources can adequately cover curriculum costs, we ask that the legislation also specify that LSATs be included in the near-final stages of conflict resolution education curriculum development to provide an opportunity for community input. To reduce potential blind spots that we all naturally have due to biases, it is important to consult the affected school community to ensure that unknown biases and blind spots are fully addressed. Further, we urge the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) to engage community organizations like the JCRC as it develops the model curriculum to be adopted by each school. We don't know what we don't know.

This legislation is a critical opportunity for the District to help our young people's personal development and to reduce the use of violent conflict resolution tactics that destroy people's lives. Thank you, Councilmember Lewis George and your staff for listening to these concerns earlier this week and for your openness to continuing this discussion. On behalf of the Jewish community of DC, thank you all for this opportunity.