

The State of Holocaust Education in America

Fifty years ago, Holocaust education was introduced in public schools as a way to encourage moral development. In an era of polarization, is this message at risk of being forgotten?

• BY DAN FREEDMAN

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As the red army approached the Majdanek death camp outside Lublin, Poland, from the east, Nazi SS guards took prisoners not capable of marching westward and gunned them down. They fell lifeless into a narrow trench—all except one. Gizella Gross, her right hip and leg shattered by a previous beating, slid into the trench with no gunshot wounds. The guards raked the still bodies with gunfire, but once again, the bullets missed Gizella. She searched for air pockets between the corpses on top of her, and once the Germans departed, she emerged—one of the few living inmates at Majdanek when the Soviets arrived in 1944. Just barely alive at age 17, she weighed 60 pounds.

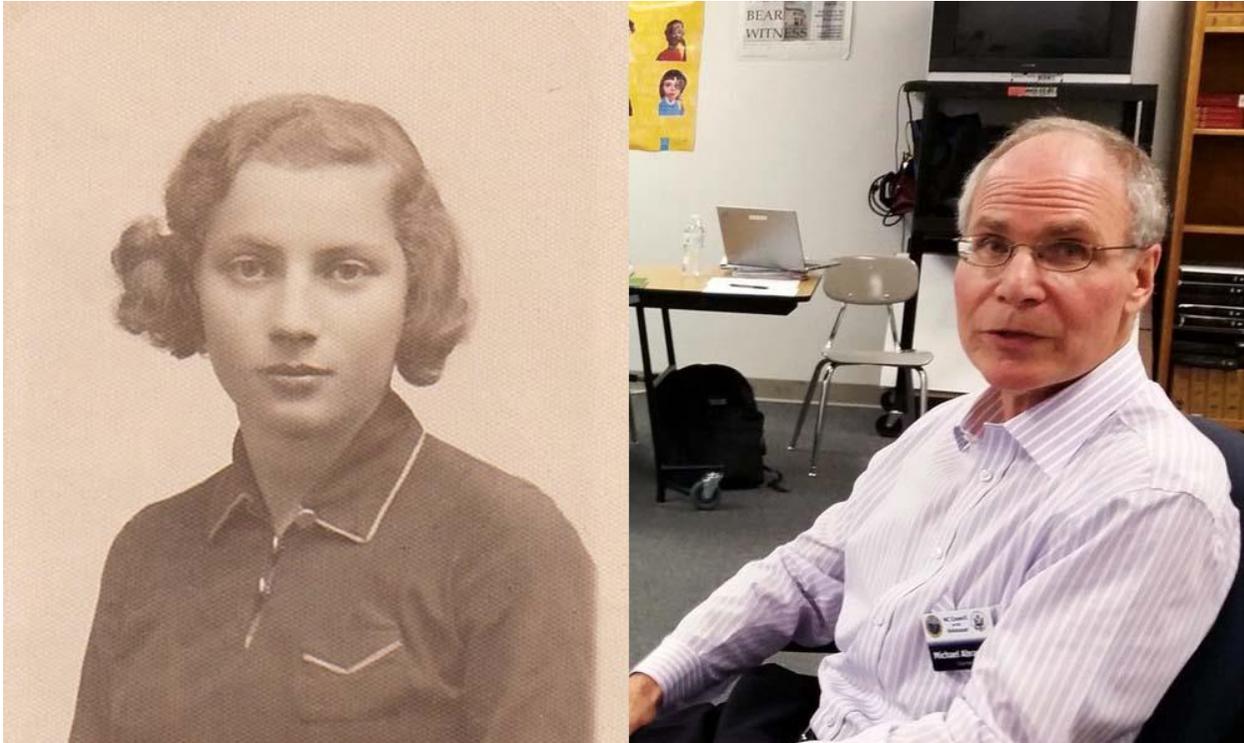
A little over 35 years later, Gizella Abramson, married with two children, was one of a group of Holocaust survivors who met with then-North Carolina Governor James B. Hunt. She was in constant pain. Walking was difficult. Her upper left arm still bore SS-branded lightning bolts. False teeth had replaced the ones the SS knocked out. Hunt listened as she and the others told their stories and urged him to create a commission to foster Holocaust education as a way to counter antisemitism and nurture inclusion, democracy and racial justice.

Out of several such discussions, the North Carolina Council on the Holocaust, the nation's first such state-level group, emerged in 1981. Its goal: bringing the phrase "Never Again" to life through teacher training and workshops, books, films, traveling exhibits and plays. Like other survivors throughout the country, Abramson spent decades visiting public schools and sharing her experiences with students. Her harrowing story had the same effect on students as it had had on Hunt: It made them want to take action, to become what those in the Holocaust education field now term an "upstander"—a person willing to stand up in the face of bullying and persecution.



Gizella Abramson with students in 1995. (Photo credit: Courtesy Michael Abramson)

Abramson died in 2011, but today her son, Michael, carries on her work in North Carolina's public schools. He celebrated in November 2021 when the North Carolina legislature approved an annual budget that included the "Gizella Abramson Holocaust Education Act," which mandates teaching of the Holocaust in the state's public schools. "It is my responsibility as a child of a Holocaust survivor to be involved in Holocaust education," he says. He and his small ad-hoc crew of deputies—all volunteers from different backgrounds—work to bring Holocaust education into public schools by supporting teachers and coordinating speakers and traveling exhibits. But his role goes beyond supporting teaching about the genocide itself. It extends to helping students connect what they learn about history to what is going on in the world.

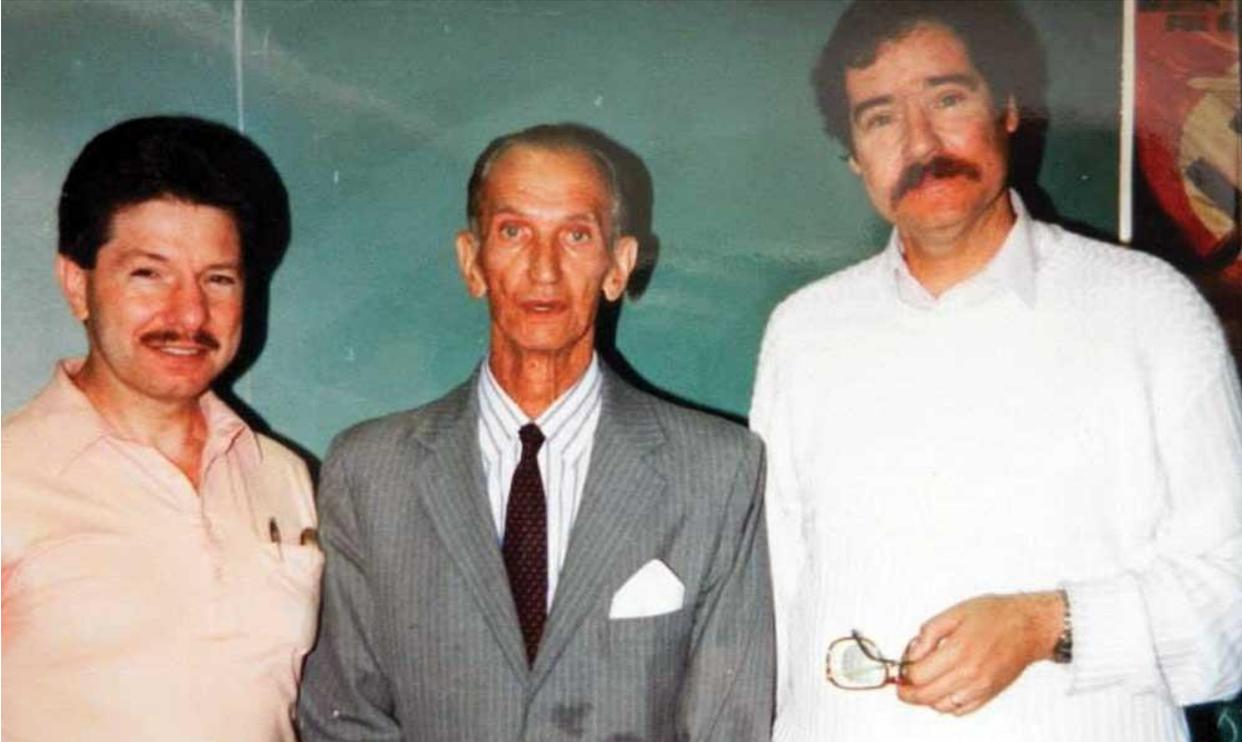


Gizella Abramson as a young woman. Michael Abramson, her son, leading a Holocaust educator workshop in 2018. (Photo credit: Courtesy Michael Abramson)

Today, he sees himself as a first responder of sorts when antisemitic incidents occur—anything from utterances of “Hitler was right” to swastikas painted on school lockers. He doesn’t just talk with teachers and students. He spends a fair amount of time working the phones, trying to get school principals to take student outbursts such as “Too bad Hitler didn’t kill all of you” seriously. “The trend is going in the wrong direction,” he says, in regard to increasing incidents of hate in schools. He is absolutely certain that Holocaust education can help prevent such scenarios by shedding light on where hatred can lead. “I try to explain to the principals that the Holocaust is not just a Jewish event,” he says. “It’s a world event.”

Abramson’s message that Holocaust education in public schools is about more than just history is a critical one. Yet in an era of rising political polarization, it is a message that is at risk of being forgotten.

In 1972 in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, 28-year-old teacher Roselle Kline Chartock listened as the social studies department chair, Jack Spencer, lamented that textbooks used in public schools never included more than a line about the Nazis' systematic slaughter of six million Jews.

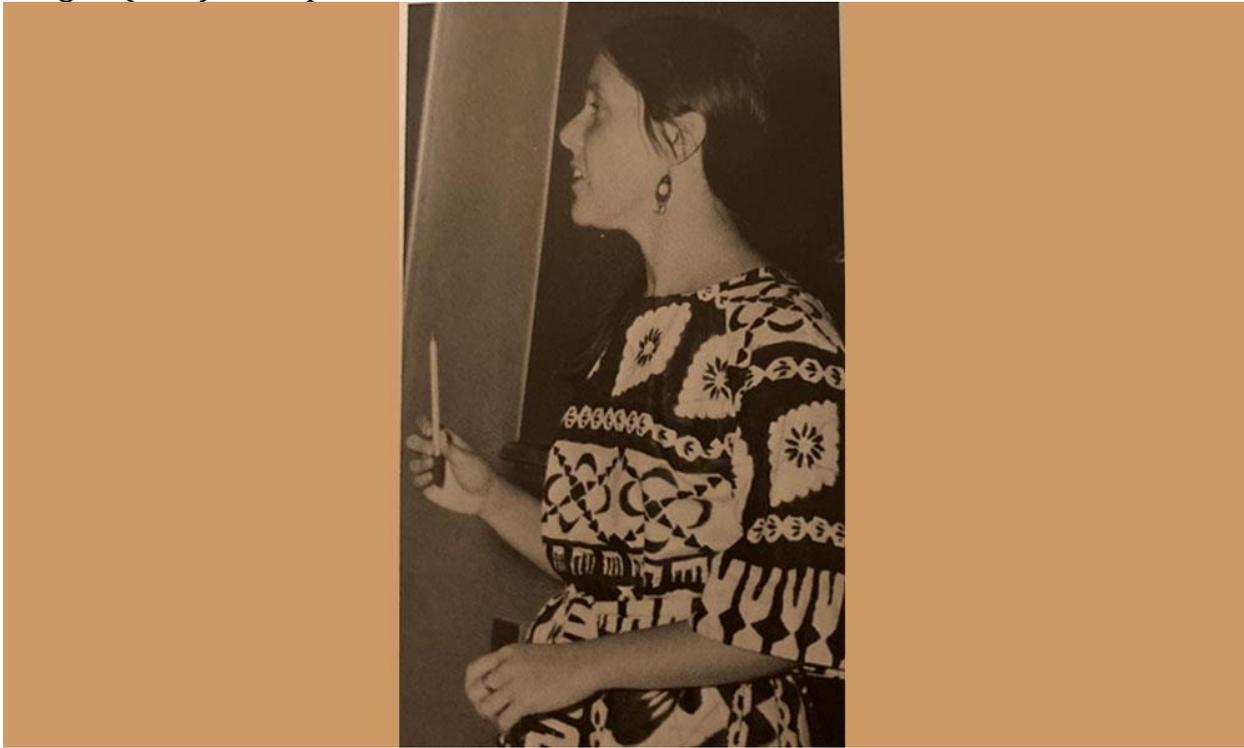


New Jersey social studies teachers Richard Flaim (left) and Harry Furman (right) with Polish resistance fighter and diplomat Jan Karski (center). (Photo credit: Courtesy Harry Furman)

Chartock was brand new at Monument Mountain Regional High School. She was bursting with 1960s-inspired idealism and anxious to help students “understand they have to make the world a better place.” Learning about the Holocaust, she thought, would give students a sense of empathy for others’ suffering and help them understand the dangers of staying silent in the face of evil. But she soon realized that despite her Jewish upbringing, most of what she knew about the Holocaust came from reading Leon Uris’ bestselling 1958 novel *Exodus*. That summer, with a small grant from the National Conference of Christians and Jews, Chartock prepared a series of readings, including poetry, survivor recollections, philosophical reflections and even song lyrics, as the basis for discussions in her freshman world history class. She organized the readings into sections that included “What Happened,” “Victims and Victimizers,” “Aftermath”

and “Could it Happen Again?” Photocopied and stapled, the series was, she now reflects, unpolished. But it became the basis of a curriculum she coedited with Spencer about the Holocaust.

Their course included references to additional atrocities—such as the mass killing of Armenians during and after World War I, the murder and displacement of Native Americans, and slavery and the slave trade—and would later become a book, *The Holocaust Years: Society on Trial*, published by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), then part of B’nai B’rith, and Bantam Books.



Roselle Chartock, then a teacher at Monument Mountain Regional High School in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. (Photo credit: Courtesy Roselle Chartock)

Chartock was in tune with her times. Similar educational ideas were popping up elsewhere in the country, notably in the small rural community of Vineland in southern New Jersey. There, social studies teachers were developing their own ideas about how to teach the Holocaust. The teachers saw the topic as a vehicle for leading students through what the renowned American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg had outlined as stages of “moral development.” In Kohlberg’s conception, young children do the right thing out of fear of punishment or to gain rewards; later, as they mature, they are motivated by social approval, then respect for rules and laws, and ultimately by allegiance to universal ethical principles. The ADL and the state teachers union put the New Jersey teachers in touch with Chartock, and a delegation was sent to Great Barrington.

Only one member of the group was Jewish: Harry Furman, a high school teacher from Vineland, was a child of Holocaust survivors. His father had survived Auschwitz, and his mother had been transported at age 14 from Poland to a Nazi labor camp in Czechoslovakia. Both had lost almost all their family members, including his father's first wife and children. Furman's parents were among a group of several hundred survivors who ended up settling in Vineland and becoming chicken farmers.



President Jimmy Carter shakes hands with Holocaust survivor Vladka Meed, who had been a member of the Jewish resistance in Poland, during a ceremony in the White House Rose Garden in September 1979 at which Elie Wiesel presented the report of the U.S. Holocaust Commission, of which he was chair. (Photo credit: Jimmy Carter library)

Yet Furman, now a 71-year-old lawyer, remembers that despite the critical mass of survivors living in the area, the Holocaust was rarely discussed openly during his childhood. Many survivors, like his parents and neighbors, wanted to leave the past behind and focus on rebuilding their lives, keeping the story of what had happened to them in Europe to themselves. Still, “despite the attempts of my parents to bring a sense of normalcy to my sister’s and my life in America,” he says, “the reality of a deep, pervasive, but silent history was there.”

Seeking to fill that silence, Furman developed his own embryonic curriculum titled “The Conscience of Man.” The course, which he tried out on his social studies students in 1976, inspired what would eventually become New Jersey’s

Holocaust curriculum. Furman used Kohlberg's stages of moral development to show how, in the words of a colleague, "this historic tragedy embodied a vast range of moral and ethical issues, as well as public and private choices, and had the potential to both educate students about a seminal historic event in the 20th century and to motivate students to reflect on their own values."

That colleague, Richard Flaim, also grew up in Vineland. He wasn't Jewish, but he had been exposed to the Holocaust as a teenager in the 1950s when he went to the doors of local chicken farmers to collect money for the newspapers he delivered. When he knocked, they peeked at him from behind closed window shades. When they came to the door, he saw the tattooed numbers on their arms. He asked his father about these unusual encounters. "His response was, 'These customers are Jewish refugees, many of whom were in concentration camps during the war. Many of them lost all or numerous members of their families. So, if they appear suspicious and cautious, you have to be understanding.'" Years later Flaim and Furman found out that their fathers, fellow farmers, knew each other, and that Flaim's father had once asked about the numbers on the senior Furman's arm. "There's part of me that believes it's no surprise that Vineland, a little community in the middle of nowhere, would be a center of Holocaust education," says Furman.

In 1978, with a small grant from the New Jersey Department of Education, Flaim, Furman and fellow teacher Ken Tubertini collaborated with teachers in the northern New Jersey town of Teaneck to develop a curriculum titled "The Holocaust and Genocide: A Search for Conscience." The materials consisted of an anthology for students and a curriculum guide for teachers that, like the Great Barrington curriculum, addressed other instances of genocide and group discrimination, including the killing of Armenians, the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, and the ongoing discrimination against Blacks in the United States.

Central to the curriculum was understanding how Hitler and the Nazis, who blamed Jews for all the ills of Western civilization, had channeled long-simmering prejudices against Jews in Europe, and turned them into a state ideology that led to the "final solution" of eradicating Jews altogether. The Holocaust was used as a case study to expose students to what happens when people fail to stand up to what they know is wrong, and to educate them about the dangers of prejudice, intolerance, stereotyping and hate. The aim was to foster students' empathy and tolerance and to teach them to question assumptions and recognize hatred.

Their curriculum, which was also published by the ADL, was tested statewide in 1980 and was incorporated into social studies lesson plans throughout the state. Two years later, the initiative got a major boost when Governor Thomas Kean, a Republican, created an Advisory Council on Holocaust Education and the state provided the fledgling project with a budget.

One of the Teaneck teachers, Edwin Reynolds, recalls that these nascent efforts in Holocaust curriculum building were not merely an exercise in idealism. They were propelled by an undercurrent of Holocaust denial and misinformation. As early as 1973, pamphlets such as American Nazi sympathizer Austin App's "The Six Million Swindle" were claiming that no Jews had been gassed in concentration camps. Reynolds remembers a meeting in which a fellow educator held aloft a book on Holocaust denial and asked what was most shocking about it. After rebuffing a series of reasoned responses, the discussion leader pointed to the copyright page, which stated the book was in its seventh printing. "That reality hit home," says Reynolds.

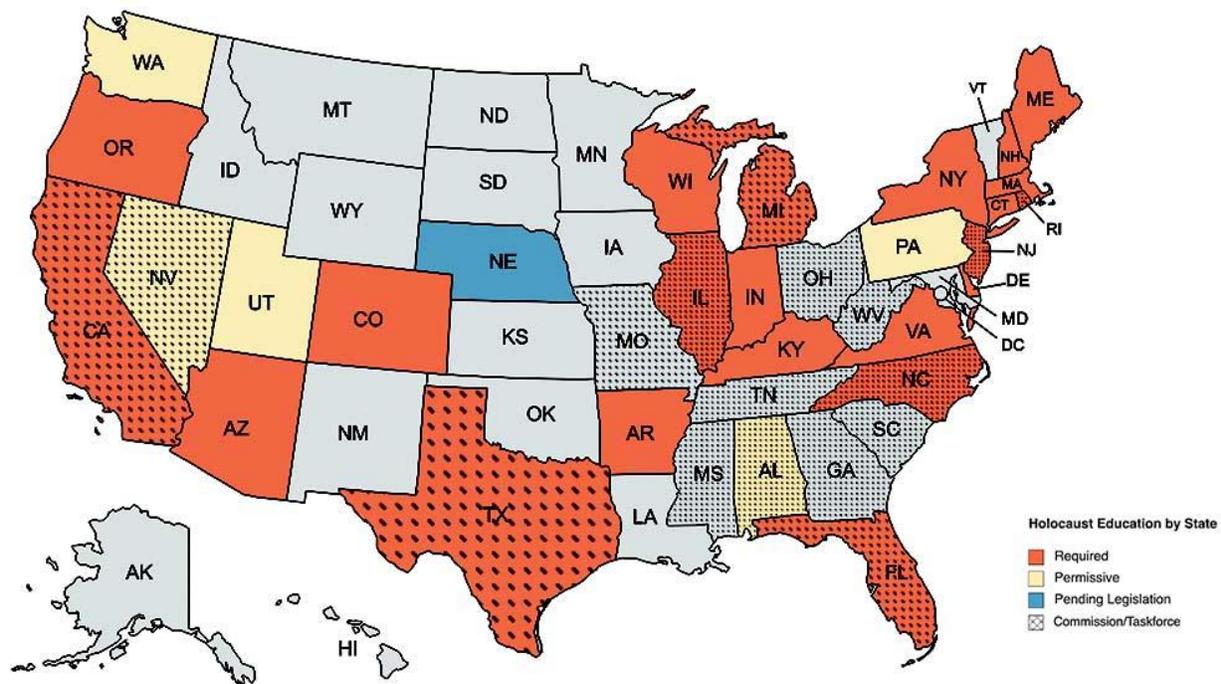
Chartock, Spencer, Furman, Flaim and Reynolds were among the pioneers in what would become a national effort to promote awareness of the Holocaust and other atrocities through public school education. Over the decades, study of the Holocaust blossomed in school districts large and small, first on the East Coast, and then spreading to the Midwest and West Coast. While the methods varied, they were united by the hope that exploring why and how this tragedy occurred would create informed citizens capable of acting in the interests of the oppressed both domestically and abroad, and in the process, nurture values of pluralism and religious and ethnic tolerance. Looking back, Furman clearly sees the importance of what he and other educators were doing. While the process of developing a curriculum and learning how to teach it was frustrating at the time, he says, "the bottom line is that this was worth doing."

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, awareness of the Nazis' near success in annihilating the Jews was buttressed by shocking newsreel footage of concentration camp victims. Later, memoirs and testimonies began to emerge. *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, published in English in 1952, became a sensation and was staged as a Broadway play in 1955. In 1960, the first English edition of Elie Wiesel's memoir *Night* was published and the

novel *Exodus* was turned into a blockbuster movie starring Paul Newman and Eva Marie Saint. In 1961, Americans were also riveted by Israel's trial of high-ranking Nazi Adolf Eichmann, which resulted in his 1962 execution. Nevertheless, although remembrances were held at synagogues, Jewish schools and community centers, memories of the horrors the Nazis had perpetrated were largely fading from the public consciousness. With a few high-profile exceptions, such as Wiesel and Italian writer Primo Levi, most survivors had not yet begun to speak out.

That began to change in the late 1960s, some say around the time of the 1967 Six-Day War between Israel and its Arab neighbors. "The Holocaust survivor generation realized that after spending their early postwar lives seeking to move beyond the painful past, they had a legacy they wished to pass on before they were gone," says Gavriel Rosenfeld, a professor of history and the director of Judaic studies at Fairfield University in Connecticut, who specializes in the Holocaust and memory studies.

The year 1978 was pivotal. That was the year that the term "Holocaust" came into widespread use after the four-part TV miniseries titled *Holocaust* aired on NBC. It depicted the Nazi genocide of European Jewry through the stories of two fictional families in Berlin: one Jewish, one not. An estimated 120 million viewers watched the series, which introduced the genocide and the word "Holocaust" to a wide swath of Americans. That same year, President Jimmy Carter made remembering the Holocaust a federal policy when he responded to calls from Jewish community leaders and agreed to establish the nation's first Commission on the Holocaust. Carter asked Elie Wiesel to chair the 34-person working group charged with recommending "an appropriate memorial to those who perished in the Holocaust." (Wiesel had cofounded *Moment Magazine* in 1975.)



Currently, in the United States, 22 states mandate Holocaust education, five have permissive statutes (legislation that is not a requirement), 17 support a Holocaust education commission or task force, one has legislation pending, and 15 have no legislation regarding Holocaust education. States or school districts may include Holocaust studies in their curriculum without a state policy in place; however, this map does not reflect those individual curriculum decisions. Data Source: Echoes & Reflections (updated by Moment)

This set off a furious debate within the Jewish community over the message of the memorial, and how closely it should focus on the Jewish Holocaust experience. After a year, a consensus was forged, and in 1979 the president accepted the commission’s recommendation to create a museum as a “living memorial” on the Mall in Washington, DC to bear witness to citizens’ responsibility in a democracy to remember and to prevent the past from being repeated. (Now named the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, it was erected with private funds on land allocated by the federal government, and opened in 1993.) As part of its mission of “Never Again,” the new memorial was to have education as a critical component. The commission envisioned that the museum would foster Holocaust education “in every school system in the country.”

This was an ambitious undertaking. There were already some private efforts to teach about the Holocaust elsewhere in the country through regional and local museums, memorials and university departments, but public schools were largely uncharted territory. Despite the federal imprimatur, states were left to

set up their own internal structures. Some, like North Carolina, established Holocaust councils or commissions to support teaching public school children. Others went further and passed laws mandating the teaching of the Holocaust in all public schools. In 1985, California became the first state to pass such legislation.



From left, Representative Elise Stefanik (R-NY), late Holocaust survivor Esther Peterseil and Representatives Carolyn B. Maloney (D-NY) and Don Bacon (R-NE) pose for a photograph before the U.S. House of Representatives vote on the Never Again Education Act in January 2020. The bipartisan act, introduced by Stefanik and Maloney, provides teachers throughout the United States with needed resources and training to teach children about the Holocaust. (Photo credit: Phi Nguyen)

“Even in the mid-1980s, we were concerned that we were losing witnesses and survivors,” says the measure’s author, Richard Katz, then a Democratic member of the California State Assembly. “And the question was always, who would tell the story to the next generation?” Katz made sure the measure extended the study of genocide to include the Armenian genocide, a move that helped it win the support of the state’s significant Armenian-American community. Illinois followed in 1989, 11 years after the 1978 planned neo-Nazi march in Skokie, a municipality adjacent to Chicago with a large number of Holocaust survivors. New Jersey, further strengthening its already well-developed Holocaust

education program, passed a law mandating it in 1994, as did Florida and New York, all three states with large Jewish populations.



Holocaust survivors, students and lawmakers gather around Arizona Governor Doug Ducey in August 2021 as he signs House Bill 2241 requiring the State Board of Education to teach students about the Holocaust and other genocides. (Photo credit: Doug Ducey Twitter)

The 1990s were critical years in the development of Holocaust education. “Reflecting and teaching about the Holocaust became a mission statement for what humane Western democracies wanted to be in the future,” says historian Emily Haber, Germany’s ambassador to the United States. “It defined responsibility for all of us.” (Germany, for obvious reasons, took its own complex path to Holocaust education.) In what has been called the “Americanization” of the Holocaust, the United States took the lead in making understanding the lessons of the Holocaust a touchstone of Western identity. This new post-Cold War moral authority was one of the factors that resulted in the U.S.-led intervention to end genocidal “ethnic cleansing” in the former Yugoslavia by brokering a peace treaty to end the Balkan War. In 1993, in his speech at the dedication ceremony for the new U.S. Holocaust memorial museum, Elie Wiesel raised an alarm about the mass killings there, sending a signal to the world that the lessons of the Holocaust have a universal dimension.

This was a message that many Americans could agree on, says Gavriel Rosenfeld. But that consensus began to fall apart as levels of political vitriol and divisiveness

ratcheted up at the turn of the 21st century. This divisiveness was further increased in the run-up to the 2016 election of Donald Trump and during his presidency. The marked growth in antisemitism, along with Holocaust denial and neo-Nazi rhetoric and violence, brought a new urgency to expanding the reach of Holocaust education in the nation's public schools.

State legislatures soon began churning out Holocaust education mandates. Michigan passed one in 2016, followed by Connecticut, Rhode Island, Kentucky and Texas in 2018. Oregon passed a mandate in 2019; Colorado, Delaware and New Hampshire in 2020; and Arizona, Arkansas, Massachusetts and Wisconsin in 2021. That same year, North Carolina pushed through a mandate as well, 40 years after Hunt established the nation's first statewide Holocaust council. So did Maine, although its law doesn't go into effect until 2023. In all, 27 states have passed some kind of law regarding Holocaust education. While those laws vary, approximately 35.5 million K-12 students out of a national total of around 49 million live in these states, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

But that doesn't mean that the remaining public school students are not learning about the Holocaust. Seven states, including Tennessee and Georgia, have commissions or task forces without mandates. Fifteen states don't have laws, commissions or task forces. Most are in the West—the Dakotas, Montana, Wyoming, Idaho—but not all. Vermont is one of them. “Without a mandate or commission, it is impossible to gauge what Vermont students are being taught and how,” says Debora Steiner, president of the Vermont Holocaust Memorial, a nonprofit advocating for Holocaust education. The group and its supporters are working to make Holocaust education a requirement, Steiner says, but it is not easy. Vermont schools and teachers “greatly prize their independence in curriculum,” and tend to resist state mandates.

In general, most Holocaust education advocates prefer mandates because they can provide increased teacher training and resources, and require greater accountability. But mandates are not guarantees of success, says Melissa Mott, project director of Echoes & Reflections, a group that provides Holocaust resource materials to schools. While Mott says mandates for Holocaust education “can be a conversation starter,” she and others in the field agree that the lack of them is not necessarily an indication of failure: “The ecosystem for good education is just as important as legislation,” she says. That means giving teachers the resources and training they need to succeed, as well as finding teachers who are committed to the subject. Teacher training is key, agrees Karen Shawn, a professor at Yeshiva University who specializes in Holocaust education

teacher training and edits PRISM, an interdisciplinary journal for Holocaust educators. Asking teachers to teach the Holocaust without sufficient training is like asking a teacher to teach physics without the necessary instruction, she says. “I couldn’t do it.”

Some states, such as New Jersey, New York and California, have developed their own curricula. New Jersey’s is tailored to the needs of schoolchildren of different ages. The K-4 curriculum, “Caring Makes a Difference,” is intended to “inculcate a spirit of respect” and draws lessons from popular children’s cartoon characters. “To Honor All Children,” for grades 5-8, gradually introduces historical information about life in the ghettos and camps and includes poems, fiction and nonfiction memoir excerpts, including two mainstays of Holocaust education nationwide, Elie Wiesel’s *Night* and Anne Frank’s *Diary of a Young Girl*. By high school, New Jersey students are exposed to the full story. “The Holocaust and Genocide: The Betrayal of Humanity” is a high school lesson plan that includes viewing historical footage, and it comes with advice to high school teachers about how to navigate the most difficult parts of Holocaust history.



Volunteer Robert Behr speaks to a group of students during their visit to the USHMM. Behr, who was born in Berlin and whose father and stepfather were both veterans of World War I, ended up with his parents in Theresienstadt, where he transported bodies for burial and worked on a road crew. The family survived deportation to Auschwitz and were liberated by the Soviet Army on May 5, 1945. Behr died in 2018. (Photo credit: Lou collection/Alamy)

As it did from the start, New Jersey’s curriculum weaves Holocaust-specific history with moral lessons. Other state curricula do the same, as do curricula provided by major organizations that supply resources for educators in states that do not have their own. The most long-standing of these is Facing History and Ourselves, which was founded in the 1970s by two teachers in Brookline, Massachusetts who received a federal grant to develop the first national Holocaust curriculum for eighth graders. Now a much larger endeavor, with a \$20 million annual budget for education and programming, Facing History offers a curriculum that is known for its strong humanitarian focus, featuring units such as “Democratic & Civic Engagement,” “Race in U.S. History” and “Bullying and Ostracism,” and surveying a range of atrocities perpetrated in different cultures.

Resources provided by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), the nation’s central clearinghouse for Holocaust education materials, also reflect on the role of citizens in a democracy. The museum’s curriculum is broken down into nine subject areas, including “The Holocaust in America” and “Antisemitism and Racism,” and includes almost 40 lesson plans geared to one, two and four days of instruction. With its \$127.7 million budget (\$69.9 million from the federal government), the USHMM spends close to \$100 million on program services, including teacher-training fellowships and individual help for any teacher who contacts the museum through its website.

A third major player is Echoes & Reflections, established in 2005, which also approaches Holocaust education with a wide lens. It aims to reshape “the way that teachers and students understand, process, and navigate the world through the events of the Holocaust, and makes it clear that the Holocaust is more than a historical event; it’s part of the larger human story.” Echoes & Reflections is a collaboration among three powerhouses—the ADL, with its long history of battling antisemitism and promoting Holocaust education; the USC Shoah Foundation, founded by Steven Spielberg in 1994 as a repository of Holocaust-survivor recollections; and Yad Vashem, Israel’s main institution devoted to Holocaust memory. (Echoes & Reflections declined to release its budget, but the ADL, USC Shoah Foundation and Yad Vashem together spend close to \$20 million a year on education.)

The universal approach is vital, says Michael Berenbaum, who headed the effort to create the USHMM and helps develop Holocaust curricula and museums worldwide. The history of antisemitism and the Holocaust is diminished if it’s too narrowly focused and non-Jews can’t relate to it, says Berenbaum, now a professor of Jewish studies at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles. “You can’t ask the world to remember the Holocaust and then expect

people not to remember it on their own terms,” he says. But there are others who fear that with broad-based curricula, students are losing the sense of the Holocaust as a uniquely horrific event, rather than just one in a parade of horrors or injustices. “Holocaust education isn’t working,” columnist Jeff Jacoby wrote last year in the *Boston Globe*, arguing that a universalist approach sacrifices greater understanding of antisemitism’s long history. “Students are not taught to recognize the singular and protean nature of Jew-hatred, or to understand how the persecution of Jews is invariably a sign of deep-rooted sickness in any society,” Jacoby wrote.

The debate between particularism versus universalism that runs deep in the Jewish community feeds into this. “The problem with Holocaust education is that we think the way to teach people that the Holocaust was bad is to make them believe Jews are just like everybody else,” novelist, essayist and Yiddish scholar Dara Horn recently said on a webinar sponsored by the Tikvah Fund. “But Jews spent 3,000 years trying not to be like everybody else. To teach the Holocaust properly, we need to focus on teaching what was lost.”

Recently, Holocaust education has become a talking point in the national culture wars raging over how best—or whether—to teach about systemic racism. Holocaust education is particularly vulnerable at times when political polarization intensifies, says Fairfield University’s Rosenfeld. “Any kind of historical education is going to become a hot potato and is going to become fodder for controversy between the left and the right, and I don’t think Holocaust education is exempt from that larger dynamic, because everyone weaponizes history to serve their partisan goals.”

Last October, an incident in Southlake, Texas set Holocaust educators on edge. In an attempt to follow a new Texas law requiring teachers to present multiple perspectives when discussing “widely debated and currently controversial” issues, a top administrator suggested the inclusion of books that cover “opposing” views of the Holocaust. (The school superintendent later apologized, saying, “We recognize there are not two views on the Holocaust.”) More recently, in an attempt to enact a similar bill in Indiana in January, one state senator said teachers should be “impartial” when teaching about Nazism. “Marxism, fascism, Nazism, I’m not discrediting any of those ‘isms’ out there...I believe that we’ve gone too far when we take a position on those ‘isms,’” he said. (He, too, later apologized).

Last year, Florida’s long-respected Holocaust education program got caught in the crossfire when Governor Ron DeSantis and the state’s education commissioner, Richard Corcoran, attempted to revise the state’s Holocaust-

education standards as part of a larger effort to purge “liberal assumptions” from school curricula. In response to calls from the religious right, DeSantis invited the Christian Zionist group Proclaiming Justice to the Nations (PJTN), whose mission is “to educate Christians about their Biblical responsibility to stand with our Jewish brethren and Israel,” to help with revisions. Their suggestions, including lessons on Judaism and the Zionist movement, drew the ire of Florida’s Task Force on Holocaust Education. A pitched battle ensued in which the ADL and other organizations accused DeSantis and PJTN of narrowly focusing on the Holocaust without any effort to connect it to “universal lessons” applicable today. In a letter to Corcoran in June 2021, ADL’s Florida director, Yael Hershfield, said the revision violated the original 1994 mandate’s language to foster “an understanding of the ramifications of prejudice, racism, and stereotyping.” In the end, neither side scored a victory. The head of PJTN said the group’s proposals had been gutted, but opponents were disappointed the new standards did not fully embrace the mandate’s original language about linking lessons on the Holocaust to racism, prejudice and intolerance.

Polarization has also complicated efforts to establish mandates at the state level. A state’s political leanings are not necessarily an indicator of whether a mandate will pass. For instance, Republican-leaning Kentucky passed a mandate in 2018, largely because for 13 years, Fred Whittaker, a Catholic school science and religion teacher, brought his students to lobby the state legislature. But arguments over what should be taught in classrooms now occur even in states where there is no pushback against the concept of mandates or against Holocaust education generally. Last year in Louisiana, a Republican-proposed mandate fell apart over the sponsors’ desire to teach about the Holocaust in a framework that equated present-day liberals with Nazis, and conservative Americans with Jews. Liberal Democrats “are the predators; we are the prey,” one advocate testified. “We need to teach [Holocaust] history to our future citizens so we don’t end up like the Jews.”

In Arizona, a state where a mandate once seemed unattainable, a group of Holocaust survivors and children of survivors pushed one through in 2021. Led by Sheryl Bronkesh, a daughter of survivors and president of the Phoenix Holocaust Association, the group persevered through years of legislative near-misses to win a mandate with the help of State Representative Alma Hernandez, a Democrat, who is Jewish. In this case, Holocaust education also got political support from conservatives, who saw it as a lesson in staying on guard against an oppressive state. “To me, Holocaust education should be nonpolitical; it’s a no-brainer,” says Bronkesh. “Do I agree with them [Republicans] on taxes?” she says, “Probably not. But I’m laser focused on Holocaust education.”



Holocaust survivor Halina Litman Yasharoff Peabody, a volunteer at the USHMM, works with students participating in the museum's Art & Memory program. The students, who are from DC's School Without Walls, are painting pictures based on survivors' memories. Peabody, who was born in Kraków, Poland, survived the war by living as a Catholic. (Photo credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)

After five decades, holocaust education is well established in the American public school system and supported by a large number of institutions in addition to the federal government. Still, it's not always clear whether it is having the desired effect of increasing public tolerance for minorities, let alone for pluralism and diversity. There are those who even argue that it is counterproductive, that a little education can be easily twisted into dangerous Holocaust analogies. One of the most visible recent distorters has been Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, who has shocked much of the nation with her comparisons of COVID-19 mask mandates to the Nazis' requirement that Jews wear the infamous yellow Stars of David. Despite apologies and even a visit to the USHMM, she has continued to make remarks that educators say betray a lack of awareness of the enormity of Nazi crimes.

Greene is hardly alone among political leaders invoking Holocaust references in sometimes trivializing ways. In fact, so many Americans allude carelessly to Holocaust history that there is even a term—Godwin’s Law—for the inevitability of any given online argument deteriorating into references to Nazis. Says Holocaust scholar Michael Berenbaum: “I would hope that good history drives bad history out of the marketplace. But there is no guarantee.”

It’s an open question how much students are actually learning today, says former USHMM director Walter Reich. “Just because you can teach something doesn’t mean people will learn it,” says Reich, a psychiatrist who teaches at George Washington University in Washington, DC. “And just because people learn it does not mean they’ll change their behavior.” History can be hard to teach, adds Fairfield University’s Rosenfeld, especially to high school students, who, when required to sit through lessons, often retain nothing beyond the foggiest references. Rosenfeld is also concerned that with the Holocaust so ubiquitous in popular culture, recent generations may be suffering from Holocaust fatigue. “At a certain point, it’s inevitable there’s going to be a little bit of backlash—just exhaustion with something that’s been going on for a generation already.”

Can the effectiveness of Holocaust education in public schools be measured? There is conflicting data. A 2020 survey by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (the Claims Conference, for short) found that 63 percent of millennials and Gen Z did not know that six million Jews had been murdered; 36 percent thought that “two million or fewer Jews” were killed; and 48 percent could not name a single concentration camp or ghetto.

A 2020 ADL survey of 1,500 college students described more positive results. Eight out of 10 students reported having received at least some Holocaust education during high school. (The majority received one month or less.) Overall, students with Holocaust education demonstrated greater knowledge about the Holocaust than their peers who did not receive Holocaust education; 78 percent of students with Holocaust education reported “knowing a lot or a moderate amount” compared to 58 percent of students with no Holocaust education.

For those who see Holocaust education as a vehicle for teaching values rather than for simply conveying historical information, the picture is even brighter. The ADL survey found that students with Holocaust education have more pluralistic attitudes and are more open to differing viewpoints. They were also significantly more likely to challenge incorrect or biased information, confront intolerant behavior in others, and stand up to negative stereotyping. When

presented with a bullying scenario, students with Holocaust education reported being more likely to offer help and were 50 percent less likely to do nothing.

Most Holocaust education teachers believe that the subject makes a difference in their students' lives. "I think once you've gone through extensive Holocaust education, it changes the way you look at people and it changes the way you look within yourself," says Susan Myers, a former Texas teacher and director of the Houston Holocaust Museum who now heads the Association of Holocaust Organizations. Victoria Kessler, a veteran teacher at Somerville High School in New Jersey, measures the success of Holocaust education from the emails she receives from former students: the ICU nurse connecting with a patient whose parents were Holocaust survivors, the students who recommend books and films they see for inclusion in the course curriculum, the college student who says "you would have been proud of me" for standing up to a Holocaust denier on campus. After learning about the Holocaust, her students often tell her: "I have a better idea of the person I want to be, and how to get there."

Rather than being discouraged by the debates raging throughout the country, many Holocaust educators view the controversies as teachable moments, proof that nearly 80 years after the Allies threw open the gates of Auschwitz, Buchenwald and other Nazi camps, learning about the Holocaust is more relevant than ever. "I think this kind of education is what every citizen needs," says Karen Murphy, director of international strategy for Facing History and Ourselves. "All citizens need a civics education that has history and ethics as part of it, that asks them to think—and think about their thinking." That need is particularly acute at a time when "the truth is up for grabs," she says. "There are rough waves and headwinds, but I'm not giving up hope."

Additional reporting by Nadine Epstein.