

To Fight Antisemitism, Improve Holocaust Education

Broad philanthropic support for combating antisemitism — and protecting democracy — must include greater investment in teaching about the Holocaust.

By [Deborah M. Lauter](#)

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U.S. HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

Student ambassadors of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's Bringing the Lessons Home program, which trains D.C.-area high school students to become docents, tour the "Tower of Faces" in the museum's permanent exhibition.

Leaders in the United States and other countries are grappling with an unprecedented surge of antisemitism and searching for how best to respond. Yet one of the most effective ways to combat antisemitism receives relatively little attention or resources: Holocaust education.

Advocacy and support for Holocaust education has traditionally come from the Jewish community. But this isn't just a Jewish issue. Antisemitism poses a clear threat to democracy and must be addressed by a wide cross-section of philanthropy.

The massacre of Jews in Israel on October 7 and the ensuing rise in antisemitic attitudes and incidents should be a wake-up call to those who thought the lessons of the Holocaust were no longer urgent. Protests against the Israel-Hamas war have unleashed classic antisemitic canards and conspiracy theories that have informed antisemitism for more than 2,000 years. These include portraying Jews as puppet-masters who control world events, accusing Jews of dual loyalty, and distorting the Holocaust with memes of Jews as Nazis, unfounded accusations of genocide, and implicit and explicit calls for the elimination of Israel.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with Israel's policies and actions, the passions stirred by the war echo historical antisemitism and promote new manifestations of it. For many Jewish students, college campuses have become threatening environments. Some even report being ostracized from campus clubs and shunned by old roommates. Programs featuring Jewish musicians and Jewish books have been canceled or boycotted, and Jews and others supporting Israel have faced in-person and online harassment. Jewish restaurants and other businesses have been vandalized or boycotted.

Whether coming from the left or the right, antisemitism has moved from the margins to the mainstream. Ambassador Deborah Lipstadt, U.S. special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism, has warned global leaders that antisemitism is ubiquitous and a threat to the stability of all governments.

Erosion of Knowledge

In the eight decades since the Holocaust, there has been a steady erosion of knowledge, especially among young people, about the atrocity in which 6 million Jews were killed. At the same time, there is growing support for rectifying the problem. A recent poll found that a vast majority of Americans support more resources for age-appropriate Holocaust education in public schools and 26 states now mandate such education be included in middle and high school curricula.

Yet little data exists on how or even whether the Holocaust is being taught in schools — or if it is, what that education looks like.

Teachers today face increasing pressures and, in many states, work under a cloud of concern about what they can and cannot teach. Short on time, and without sufficient support for professional development, even the most well-intentioned teachers may find themselves offering just a brief lesson about the Holocaust that focuses on the genocide of Jews without delving into the historical context of antisemitism, its prejudices and stereotypes. Importantly, they may stop short of connecting the Holocaust to larger lessons about how easily hate can take hold in a democratic society, and the consequences when individuals are indifferent or silent.

As the executive director of the Olga Lengyel Institute, or TOLI, which provides professional development for teachers on Holocaust education and human rights, I frequently hear from participants who say they feel underprepared to teach this difficult.

subject. Some may be aware of the excellent resources provided by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum or Holocaust education groups such as Echoes & Reflections, but they acknowledge being overwhelmed by the vastness of the subject and uncertain about how to navigate it within the constraints of the classroom.

Many have no familiarity with Jewish religion, history, or culture, and they welcome the opportunity we provide to learn from rabbis and scholars and visit synagogues. To effectively fight antisemitism, Holocaust education must include material not just on how Jews died, but how they live, and how they have managed to maintain their heritage and culture in the face of persecution.

For these reasons, philanthropy should make support for teachers a priority in any effort to both address antisemitism and maintain our democracy. This isn't about one-time programs. Yes, supporting Holocaust museums and centers and funding student trips remains vitally important. New York City, for example, recently announced an initiative to bring 85,000 eighth graders to the Museum of Jewish Heritage over the coming years. The Gray Foundation, run by Blackstone CEO Jon Gray, gave \$1 million to the effort, which is expected to cost approximately \$2.5 million.

Not Just a “Jewish Issue”

To have a lasting impact, however, educators need the tools to teach students about the Holocaust as not solely a “Jewish issue,” but one with far broader lessons. Such an approach will help teachers and students think critically about their roles in civil society and the importance of confronting negative stereotypes, prejudice, and bigotry against communities that are vulnerable to hate; confront the dangerous consequences of propaganda, misinformation and disinformation; recognize and reject falsehoods; and explore universal lessons about the importance of resistance to injustice and resilience in the face of difficult challenges.

A recent study showed that students who received Holocaust education in school are less likely to hold antisemitic views and more likely to be empathetic, tolerant, and engaged in general. This is encouraging, but at this critical time much more is needed.

Jewish and non-Jewish philanthropists alike can help expand existing teacher education programs at Holocaust museums, centers, and organizations across the country — and create new ones. The Association of Holocaust Organizations has a complete list of these, searchable by state.

Individual, foundation, and corporate support is needed for professional development seminars for middle and high school educators who often don't have the resources to attend programs during the school year or travel to regional programs like those offered by TOLI in the summer.

Providing classrooms with books about the Holocaust and funds for field trips to Holocaust centers can be supported through organizations such as the [Mark Schonwetter Holocaust Education Foundation](#). Programs that take educators to Holocaust sites, like one sponsored by the [Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Foundation](#), can have a profound and lasting impact on what gets taught in the classroom.

And as the number of Holocaust survivors continues to decline, increased support is needed for programs such as [3GNY](#) and [USC Shoah Foundation Living Links](#), which seek to bring the voices of descendants into schools and elsewhere.

[Numerous academic institutions](#) offer master's and other degree programs in Holocaust and genocide studies, but funders can help expand them and provide scholarships so more teachers can attend. Philanthropy could also help replicate experiential programs such as the [Spector/Warren Fellowship](#) for Holocaust and Human Rights Education at Syracuse University. The fully funded program encompasses five days of intensive study at the [Holocaust Museum Houston](#).

Finally, there is an immediate need for evaluation of current and future Holocaust education programs so that academic and other research organizations know that what they're offering is making a difference.

Antisemitism did not begin or end with the Holocaust, and there is no short-term fix to this longest continuing form of hate. But investing now in Holocaust education is one of the most powerful approaches available to reign in its spread and protect our fragile democracy.

Deborah M. Lauter

Deborah M. Lauter is executive director of the Olga Lengyel Institute for Holocaust Studies and Human Rights.