



## ZIONIST ORGANIZATION OF AMERICA

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### **VIA EMAIL**

State Board of Education  
c/o California Department of Education  
Curriculum Frameworks and Instructional Resources Division  
1430 N Street, Suite 3207  
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Members of the State Board of Education:

We write on behalf of the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA), the oldest and one of the largest pro-Israel organizations in the U.S., committed to fighting antisemitism in all its forms – in schools, on college campuses, and wherever this ugly bigotry exists. We continue to have deep concerns about the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum (ESMC) and urge you to revise the current draft.

As we explained in an August 2019 letter, the first draft of the ESMC shockingly and unacceptably made only a passing reference to Jews as an ethnic group and did not address antisemitism at all, even though Jew-hatred – including physical assaults against Jews – is horrifyingly increasing. While the current draft now includes some material about Jewish Americans and does address antisemitism, it hardly reflects the experiences of the Jewish people. We are outraged and offended that the ESMC actually paints Jews as “white” and “privileged” when in fact, the Jewish people have endured an incomparable history of discrimination, prejudice, hate and efforts to annihilate them – and yet they have survived and thrived. These truths are not accurately reflected in the current draft. The ESMC must be revised again to remove the lies and distortions – which may well lead to anger against and hatred of Jews – and instead build knowledge and understanding among California students of the unique experiences, struggles and contributions of the Jewish people.

### **The ESMC’s Far-too-Narrow Lens of Antisemitism**

While the current draft of the ESMC now addresses antisemitism, it does so in an unacceptably limited and distorted way. It strangely focuses on antisemitism experienced by Jewish Middle Eastern Americans only [see ESMC’s Sample Lesson 40: Antisemitism and Jewish Middle Eastern-Americans, pp. 485-90] – even though Jewish Americans from other regions and backgrounds have been, and continue to be, targeted by antisemites and to suffer the consequences of their bigotry. As the ESMC recognizes, the American Jewish community is beautifully diverse. It should be educating students to understand that regardless of the region from which they hail, the level of their religious observance, their skin color, or any other characteristics, many Jews have unfortunately encountered and been harmed by antisemitism.

### The ESMC Fails to Accurately Define Antisemitism

A second problem is the ESMC's definition of antisemitism. See ESMC at p. 491. It is far too narrow and fails to recognize the many ways that antisemitism is expressed today, including when Jew-hatred is masked as criticism of Israel.

The current draft of the ESMC does refer to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism. See ESMC at p. 491. But the draft includes only a portion of the definition, leaving out the critically important contemporary examples of antisemitism that the IHRA [identifies](#):

- Calling for, aiding, or justifying the killing or harming of Jews in the name of a radical ideology or an extremist view of religion.
- Making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as collective — such as, especially but not exclusively, the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions.
- Accusing Jews as a people of being responsible for real or imagined wrongdoing committed by a single Jewish person or group, or even for acts committed by non-Jews.
- Denying the fact, scope, mechanisms (e.g. gas chambers) or intentionality of the genocide of the Jewish people at the hands of National Socialist Germany and its supporters and accomplices during World War II (the Holocaust).
- Accusing the Jews as a people, or Israel as a state, of inventing or exaggerating the Holocaust.
- Accusing Jewish citizens of being more loyal to Israel, or to the alleged priorities of Jews worldwide, than to the interests of their own nations.
- Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor.
- Applying double standards by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.
- Using the symbols and images associated with classic antisemitism (e.g., claims of Jews killing Jesus or blood libel) to characterize Israel or Israelis.
- Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.
- Holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel.

Importantly, the IHRA definition makes it clear that “criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic.”

Internationally renowned human rights activist Natan Sharansky has [described](#) what he has called the “new antisemitism” in this way:

Whereas classical anti-Semitism is aimed at the Jewish people or the Jewish religion, "new anti-Semitism" is aimed at the Jewish state. Since this anti-Semitism can hide behind the veneer of legitimate criticism of Israel, it is more difficult to expose. Making

the task even harder is that this hatred is advanced in the name of values most of us would consider unimpeachable, such as human rights.

The ZOA works with college students on campuses across the U.S., including many colleges and universities in California, helping them when they face antisemitic harassment and discrimination. Indeed, our civil rights action against the University of California, Irvine – filed after the university failed to effectively redress years of antisemitism on campus – was the first case of antisemitism that the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights ever investigated under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. We have advocated for and helped students on many other California campuses, including UC Berkeley, UCLA, Stanford University, San Francisco State University, and Pitzer College, to name a few.

In our long experience, it is antisemitism relating to Israel that students are likely to encounter on their campuses. Particularly given how insidious this form of antisemitism is, the ESMC does a disservice to California students by failing to acknowledge and explain antisemitism expressed as anti-Israelism and anti-Zionism. Before they enter college, these students should understand when criticism of Israel is actually camouflaging Jew-hatred, so that they will be prepared to stand up to it and stop it.

The IHRA working definition of antisemitism is a comprehensive, excellent definition used by the [U.S. government](#) and by more than 30 countries around the world. It should be included in its entirety in the ESMC, to reflect the truth: that antisemitism evolves and is expressed in many ways, and that we must understand it in all its forms so that it can be identified and eradicated.

#### The ESMC Wrongly and Outrageously Encourages Antisemitism

For the 25 years that the FBI has maintained hate crime statistics, Jews have been targeted more than any other religious group, by a wide margin. Yet shamefully and offensively, the ESMC promotes the notion of Jews as “white” and “privileged” [see ESMC at pp. 494-95, 499], which places Jews in the category of oppressors rather than the oppressed, and diminishes their experiences with antisemitism here in the U.S. and throughout history. There are surely members of other religious and ethnic groups that have white skin. But we have never heard of Arab Americans being labeled as white Arab Americans. Or Muslim Americans being labeled as white Muslim Americans. Singling out so-called white Jewish Americans is another way to marginalize, demonize and discriminate against the Jewish people.

Frighteningly, antisemitism is on the rise. Just two years ago, in October 2018, our country suffered the single deadliest attack on the Jewish community in American history, when 11 Jews were murdered at a Pittsburgh synagogue and six other individuals were wounded. Months later, in April 2019, an antisemite opened fire at the Chabad of Poway in California, killing one congregant and injuring several others.

In December 2019, two individuals – at least one of whom was associated with the antisemitic Black Hebrew Israelites group – stormed a kosher market in Jersey City, New Jersey, killing three. Weeks later, an individual barged into the home of a rabbi in Monsey, New York, during a Chanukah celebration. He attacked people with a machete, killing one and injuring four. Since December 2019, there were a series of attacks on Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn, New York. Eight occurred during a span of eight days. Jews were assaulted physically and with antisemitic slurs. Objects were thrown at them, and several were hit or punched in the head or the face.

Recently, rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol. Among them were Holocaust deniers and neo-Nazis. One man wore a “Camp Auschwitz” tee shirt emblazoned with a skull and crossbones. The shirt also

included the phrase “work brings freedom” – a translation of “Arbeit macht frei,” the message that greeted Jews and other prisoners who entered the Auschwitz concentration camp.

Given all these terrifying examples of anti-Jewish bigotry, which include violence and murders, encouraging California students to see Jews as “white” and “privileged” is a gross distortion of the Jewish experience, and diminishes the hatred, discrimination and brutality the Jewish people have endured throughout history, including in the U.S. The “white” and “privileged” label wrongly incites resentment and even hatred of Jews, rather than understanding, inclusiveness and respect for a people who have survived despite many efforts to destroy them. Notably, the term “privilege” is not applied to any other ethnic group identified in the ESMC. Only to Jews, which smacks of antisemitism. All statements and insinuations that Jews have experienced white privilege should be deleted from the ESMC.

A final criticism is the ESMC’s inclusion of this odd bullet point in its Fact Sheet about Jewish Americans, Antisemitism, and Race: “Jews often changed Jewish sounding names to avoid discrimination, to assimilate, or for reasons of internalized oppression. Starting with immigrants, and common with actors, this practice of name-changing continues to the present day” [see ESMC at p.505].

In fact, name-changing is not unique to Jewish Americans. Many other Americans, actors and non-actors, have changed their names, to avoid discrimination, to assimilate, and for a host of other reasons. This gratuitous bullet point unfairly and unreasonably singles out Jews. It, too, smells of antisemitism, and should be deleted.

We urge you to make the revisions we have recommended. The current draft of the ESMC is not just inaccurate; it is also offensive. An ESMC with these revisions will encourage a better understanding of the Jewish people’s unique history, their struggles, and their incredible contributions to California, our country, and the world.

Very truly yours,



Morton A. Klein  
National President



Susan B. Tuchman, Esq.  
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