

Jamie Spector, LICSW
681 Spruce Mtn. Rd. Plainfield, VT 05667
510-846-8806 ~ jspector@riseup.net

To the State Board of Education

Re: Education Quality Standards - Recommendations by the Act.1 Working Group

I am writing in support of the Education Quality Standards (EQS) recommendations by the Act.1 Working Group, I am a resident in Plainfield, and a social worker working at a public school in Vermont. I am also a mother of two children in public school at Twinfield Union School, and a member of the Jewish community. I am writing to strongly support the EQS as recommended as I feel that it creates a powerful platform to improve educational practices and outcomes for all Vermont young people. I also want to express a lot of gratitude and appreciation for the amazing, and countless hours of work that the Act.1 Working group and the EQS sub-committee that have put into the planning and the document and creating a process with integrity that takes all voices into account.

I have been following the work of Act.1 since before it became law and testified during the legislative process. Since then, I have been following the work of the Education Quality Standards subcommittee and have read the documentation. I read the letters from the Anti-Defamation League and the Jewish Communities of Vermont regarding their advocacy to include language around anti-Semitism and their assertion that they do not feel included. I testified along other Jewish community members during the Act. 1 Working Group meeting in March stating that the Jewish Communities of Vermont letter does not speak for all Jewish people in the state and that we reject exceptionalism and embrace collective liberation.

The very lengthy and specific definitions of discrimination, really covers all people and intentionally not naming every ethnic group that might appear in Vermont is the right way to go. In the same light, it doesn't need to name every single religion in Vermont. The changes to this rule will create spaces in our schools where we will be teaching all of our students and creating policies and practices that don't allow for discrimination. I feel that this is the right approach. We do not need to single out the definition of anti-Semitism as some sort of exceptional form of discrimination. This does not make Jewish people safer.

Having a clear definition of discrimination is inclusive and incorporates all people and it is what will bring us closer to a safer and more equitable education system. Embedding collective liberation leaves room for others to see themselves. My opposition, and the opposition of the others who spoke on March 17th, to include the specific reference to anti-Semitism is related to a specific issue that is a global conversation. The problematic and fairly widely discredited, working definition of anti-semitism from the IHRA is well-known internationally and it is used as cover for suppressing speech and criticism of the Israeli government.

In July 2018 over 40 Jewish groups from around the world issued a joint statement condemning this campaign of equating criticism of Israel with anti-Jewish hatred. The joint statement explains "From our own histories we are all too aware of the dangers of increasingly fascistic and openly racist governments and political parties...The rise in antisemitic discourse and attacks worldwide is part of that broader trend. At times like this, it is more important than ever to distinguish between the hostility

to or prejudice against Jews on the one hand, and legitimate critiques of Israeli policies and system of injustice on the other."

I am very concerned that including the term anti-Semitism into the Vermont Education Quality Standards would open the way for Vermont school and students to face repercussions as a result of their legitimate and constitutionally-protected right to publicly question and critique the Israeli government or any other government on that matter. Let's remember that 200 respected scholars in the fields of Holocaust studies, Jewish history and the middle east have formally rejected the definition the anti-defamation league has called for. Let's seek to dismantle antisemitism not define it.

As such, I strongly support the current recommendations, as written by the Act 1 Working Group. I feel that the current language appropriately protects all historically marginalized groups and those who, unfortunately, face discrimination and acts of hatred today. Please remember that the Anti-Defamation League and the Jewish Communities of Vermont do not speak for all Jewish people in Vermont. I feel that the process this far has been extremely fair and inclusive of all voices. There has been sufficient time for public comment at every meeting, and the Working Group is itself comprised of a very diverse group representing many voices here in Vermont.

Thank you so much for your important work to improve Vermont schools for all of Vermont's children.

Sincerely,

Jamie Spector