

Dear State Board of Education,

Jewish Communities of Vermont is sharing our concern for your proposed Education Quality Standards. This is a follow up to our comments we made verbally at the first hearing.

Sincerely,

*Rabbi Tobie Weisman*

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My name is Rabbi Tobie Weisman. I am the Executive Director of Jewish Communities of Vermont, and a member of Beth Jacob Synagogue in Montpelier. I am also the Founding Director of the Yearning for Learning Center for Jewish Studies.

Jewish Communities of Vermont is a non-profit which has been supporting Jews and Jewish organizations throughout Vermont, including advocating for their interests, since 2013. This is an issue that I personally and our whole organization care deeply about.

I want to start from the basic premise that we at Jewish Communities of Vermont support a comprehensive and pedagogically sound ethnic studies program for the Vermont educational system. In fact, when our state legislature passed its definitions of ethnic groups and ethnic

studies in Act I, we were supportive. Our concern, which we have expressed continually over the last year, and most recently with a letter we authored in August to the State Board of Education, is the significant and meaningful changes that have been made to the all-important Act I definitions of Ethnic Groups, in what is now the Education Quality Standards in front of you today.

Act I that was passed by our state legislative body after debate, clearly and intentionally defined Ethnic Groups as follows: (A) nondominant racial and ethnic groups in the United States, including people who are Abenaki, people from other indigenous groups, people of African, Asian, Pacific Island, Chicano, Latinx, or Middle Eastern descent; and (B) groups that have been historically subject to persecution or genocide.

Jewish Communities of Vermont advocated for part (B) of the definition, because groups, including Jews who have been historically subjected to persecution and genocide should be studied. Simply put, the current definition of Ethnic Groups that is in front of you today has dramatically altered the definition of the defined groups in part (A) and has completely removed part (B) from the definition of Ethnic Groups. By removing part (B) of the definition of Ethnic Groups and placing the words “genocide and persecution” as things to be studied in Ethnic Studies, Vermont educational curriculum will inevitably wind-up erasing the study of Jews and other groups of people that have been subjected to a history of genocide and persecution. It is not just the genocides and persecutions that can and should be studied by our students as stand-alone incidents in world history, but rather, it is also the history, culture and contributions of these people that should be explored.

At a time of heightened and rising antisemitism in the United States and throughout the world, it is imperative that we have definitions that will require teaching about the Jewish people as an ethnic group. For example, many people believe that being a Jew means that you practice Judaism. While Judaism is the shared religion of the Jewish people, Jews can be deeply religious or completely secular; either way, a Jewish person is a Jewish person. Consequently, and contrary to what many people think, antisemitism in its modern form is rarely about religion. It's not usually anti-Judaism. It's almost always anti-Jew. It is not about how Jewish people pray, but

about what Jews are falsely accused of doing, often collectively. For antisemitism and its evils to be properly taught, our students need to understand both its origins and its modern applications – it would be impossible to understand modern antisemitism without a comprehensive overview of the Jewish people. Under Act I's original definition of Ethnic Group, the Jewish people would be studied under part (B).

We are asking this committee to recommend that part B of the definition of Ethnic Groups, that was already passed by our state legislature be reinserted. The definitions were created by our legislative body after much thought and discussion and with input from affected communities, for very important reasons. The legislative definitions of Ethnic Groups should continue to guide how we prepare our young people to think objectively in an increasingly complex world.