

Executive Council of Australian Jewry Inc.

הוועד הפועל של
יהודי אוסטרליה

The Representative
Organisation of
Australian Jewry



19 September 2023

NSRA Review Taskforce
Australian Government Department of Education

Dear Vanessa

ECAJ Submission to NSRA Review Taskforce

Thank you for inviting us to make a submission to the NSRA Review Taskforce. As requested, we have confined our submission to those areas relating directly to the work and expertise of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ) in antisemitism education and social cohesion.

Background

The ECAJ was established in 1944 and is the peak national representative body of the Australian Jewish community. Its core function is to make representations on behalf of Australian Jews on those matters that fundamentally impact our community, and our way of life as Australians and Jews. Living free from the hatred of the Jewish people known as antisemitism, is central to ensuring Australian Jews are able to enjoy rights and freedoms equal to all other Australians.

Antisemitism is the greatest threat to our community. It is a form of hatred primarily conveyed, felt and expressed through a series of conspiracy theories and myths which have been refined over hundreds of years. This gives antisemitism an incredible tenacity as well as a viciousness and capacity for violence that is incomparable to other forms of prejudice.

Antisemitism in Australia today

Antisemitism in Australia has increased by **42%** since 2020. This is a deeply alarming statistic but one that is entirely consistent with a historical examination of antisemitism. Increases in antisemitism have long coincided with phenomena such as economic downturn, rising inequality, pandemic, war and natural disaster because antisemitic conspiracy theories, particularly relating to supposed Jewish power, greed and evil, are used to provide explanations for complex events or to redirect blame and popular outrage.

History also demonstrates that societies that are increasingly taken in by antisemitism and the mythology that accompanies it, are inevitably overcome

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by paranoia, fear and others forms of intolerance and racism. Antisemitism is the enemy of rationalism and an irrational society cannot be a healthy one.

In reporting on antisemitism in Australia, we have been particularly disturbed by two aspects of the statistical increase:

Firstly, the soaring number of antisemitic incidents of physical violence, harassment, and intimidation emanating from primary and secondary schools across Australia.

Secondly, the use of online platforms, social media and often unregulated chat forums and messaging services to spread antisemitism, recruit followers to antisemitic ideas or specific groups, and in some cases, to plan violent attacks.

Recommendations

The failings in culture, attitudes and deficiencies in education that have given rise to this grave problem require a multipronged approach that engages teachers, administrators, students and families.

It is also important to distinguish between the study of the Holocaust and specific training on contemporary antisemitism. The study of the Holocaust is critical to understanding totalitarianism, genocide, collaboration, dehumanisation and propaganda and much more. However, unless it is studied intensively, it does not foster an understanding of antisemitism as a distinct and complex form of hatred that both long preceded the Holocaust and survives it. Therefore, our recommendations are in no way intended to replace existing Holocaust studies. We firmly believe that any reduction in Holocaust education would seriously undermine efforts to build social cohesion and would result in a failure to nurture well-informed, intelligent and empathetic Australians.

To this end, we make the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1 – Teacher training

Provide training to teachers via online video modules or other practical delivery methods on contemporary antisemitism so that educators are able to recognise antisemitic conduct, harmful stereotypes and dangerous conspiracy theories and are equipped to address and challenge them.

Recommendation 2 – Resource provision

In order to support teachers, parents and students and instil a clear and lasting understanding of antisemitism, we recommend that a combination of print and digital resources be provided. The ECAJ has developed some of these resources, including a new book on the origins and manifestations of antisemitic myths, and will be working with international experts including the Anti-Defamation League (USA) to produce and/or adapt useful resources for Australian audiences. This will ensure that the material is effective in not only combating antisemitism but in developing the reasoning and critical faculties to enable students to see through online extremism of all forms.

Recommendation 3 – Engagement

Engagement between non-Jewish and Jewish students is a highly effective way to overcome stereotypes and neutralise myths and conspiracy theories. It is also, in our experience, a deeply rewarding experience for all parties which serves to foster empathy and social cohesion.

Recommendation 4 – Empowering students

In order to instil a sense of civic duty and responsibility in students, we recommend the establishment of student committees in each school upon completion of the education and engagement components. These committees should be made up of senior students who will be encouraged to conceive and implement positive strategies to build cohesion and empathy in their schools and communities. This concept is based on a highly successful model used by the Anti-Defamation League (USA) to ensure that education and engagement is continuous and leads to meaningful changes in student culture.

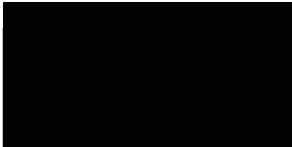
Conclusion

The ECAJ is willing to deliver the above recommendations in partnership with the Review Taskforce and the Department of Education. It is our firm and sincere belief that these recommendations are urgently needed to arrest the disturbing trends in our schools and our society. These measures will foster the strength of character and mind, sense of decency and empathy in our students that will lead to better outcomes in education for the good of all Australians.

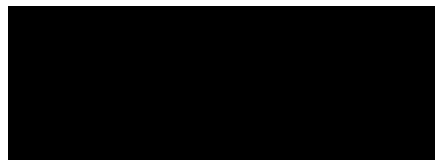
We would be pleased to discuss these recommendations with you further or to provide any additional information you may require.

With warm regards

Yours sincerely



Jillian Segal AO
President
Executive Council of Australian Jewry



Alex Ryvchin
Co-Chief Executive Officer
Executive Council of Australian Jewry