

TO: VERMONT BOARD OF EDUCATION
FROM: AVRAM PATT
DATE: OCTOBER 5, 2023
SUBJECT: DEFINITION OF "ETHNIC GROUP" IN ETHNIC QUALITY STANDARDS ,
RULE SERIES 2000

As I noted in my brief spoken comments at the hearing on October 3rd, I am providing these written comments to fully explain my concerns, to provide more information, historic and current Vermont context, and to ask Board members to reconsider the troubling and frankly exclusionary omission of "Part B" in the definition of "ethnic groups" in the Education Quality Standards (which I am in support of generally with this exception).

Some personal background: I have been a Vermont resident for 53 years and have been a Member of the Vermont House beginning in 2015. I am the son of refugees who escaped Poland when the Nazis invaded, and who were among the very small number of Jews who were able to get to this country then, thanks only to the heroic and unauthorized efforts of the Japanese Consul in Lithuania, Chiune Sugihara. Jews were basically not allowed entry into this country then due to the on-the-record antisemitic policies and actions of the leadership of the U.S. State Department at that time. I grew up in a community that included a number of Holocaust survivors, as well as a few who had fought in the Resistance and survived, and who were all active in Poland and in this country in Jewish organizations working for social and economic justice for all. Members of my father's family fought and died heroically in the Resistance in Bialystok. I am named after my maternal grandfather, who along with my grandmother, perished in an extermination camp they were transported to from Warsaw.

ACT 1. When Act 1 was being considered by the Legislature in 2019. I was troubled by a significant omission in the definition of "ethnic groups." I was in part responsible for the addition to the bill as passed of "Part B," which includes any peoples historically victims of genocide and persecution.

The personal impacts of bias and discrimination on people of ethnic groups defined in Section B may in some ways be different than the impacts on people

who can be identified as members of an ethnic group by other characteristics. But they are very real. There is a long history in this country, and in Vermont's own history, of open or unspoken antisemitic discrimination and exclusion by class. More recent incidents of antisemitic defacement of public buildings and homes or verbal or online attacks are physical threats, and they're real. The incidence, frequency and severity of such threats continues to increase nationally, and very much so in Vermont. In my own life, I am very aware that antisemitic incidents in Vermont are not isolated, are instigated by forces who are neo-Nazis and deeply racist as well as antisemitic. I feel that threat and I know within me that it could become more than just a threat.

Genocide. As you may know, the term "genocide" is a relatively recent one which came into being after the Holocaust. There have been more recent genocides of other peoples in other parts of the world, and throughout human history. The Holocaust was certainly greater in scale and in its systematic plans and methods by which it was carried out. But there is a much longer history, and I would ask that Board members and others read or at least scan through this brief description and chronology of numerous "pogroms" in modern as well as earlier history: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pogrom>

In the news. The rising incidence of antisemitic incidents, also with racist language and threats as well, should be known to all working to address these issues in Vermont. I am including just three very recent news accounts of such incidents, which I ask that you be aware of, if not already:

Montpelier City Council: https://www.timesargus.com/news/local/anti-semitic-remarks-prompt-swift-response-in-montpelier/article_3cec6c58-eaec-58b3-9535-553a581a4637.html

Montpelier High School (more serious and with longer history and implications, IMO): <https://montpelierbridge.org/2023/06/mhs-swastika-not-the-only-antisemitic-incident-in-schools-mhs-swastika-not-the-only/>

Brownington (home town of Alexander Twilight, whose portrait now hangs in the State House lobby): https://www.caledonianrecord.com/news/local/old-stone-house-tower-attacked-by-vandals-painted-with-swastikas-antisemitic-hate-speech/article_218cc245-0176-5af3-ad29-7eeba94fe0b9.html

Legislative intent. So, it is therefore puzzling, but also troubling and concerning that the language in Part B of what is now Vermont Statute governing the Board and the Department of Education was omitted, not included, in the Education Quality Standard. Part B is also Legislative intent. While I am asking the Board to correct this omission, I would also like to understand the reason or motive for its omission.

Additional note, not part of my comments: These comments pasted in at the bottom of this email and attached, as well as my brief comments at the October 3 hearing, were prepared before the Hamas attack, the Israeli retaliation and all that is happening at this time. I urge all considering my comments to keep those events and any opinions and feelings about these terrible current violent attacks separate from this issue of the definition of ethnic groups in the Standard. In past discussions I have had with individuals involved in this process and on other issues regarding equity and inclusion, I have sometimes been troubled by the incorrect and harmful conflation that some make between the actions of a nation and its political leadership, with the history and experience of an ethnic group, Jewish Americans/Vermonters. They are not the same and it is wrong to make that connection. The vast majority of American Jews are descendants of immigrants and refugees who came here escaping poverty, oppression and worse, starting in the late 19th century and through the first half of the 20th. As research, including a number of surveys and reports by the Pew Research Center has shown, opinions about the State of Israel and about the concept of Zionism vary widely among Jewish Americans and Vermonters, ranging from ardent and unequivocal support to very strong opposition, and mostly everything in between. It is not accurate and in fact biased to stereotype members of an ethnic group with the actions or policies of a political state, which in some cases they may have escaped from, and in this case, never have lived in

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