May 8, 2024

Honorable Aaron Bean, Chair
Honorable Suzanne Bonamici, Ranking Member
House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education

Re: Confronting Pervasive Antisemitism in K-12 Schools

On behalf of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), I appreciate this opportunity to provide expert testimony for the record to the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education. NASP represents over 25,000 school psychologists who work with students, families, educators, administrators, and communities to support student success in school and in life. NASP is committed to advocating for the rights, education, mental health, and behavioral needs of students and believes all students are entitled to receiving a public education in a safe, positive, and inclusive environment where they can learn about themselves and the world around them.

Positive educational and social outcomes for all children and youth are possible only in a society—and schools within it—that eradicates all forms of discrimination, harassment, and bullying in our education system and communities. As such, we appreciate the Subcommittee's attention to addressing antisemitism and how it harms students, their families, and educators—particularly those who identify as or are perceived to be Jewish.

NASP is deeply concerned by the significant surge in antisemitism and other acts of bias and discrimination against Arab, Israeli, Muslim, and Palestinian students and educators. Although antisemitism has been on the rise for more than a decade, it has increased significantly, and become a topic of national concern since October 7, 2023. Like the Members of this Subcommittee, we have been alarmed by reports of Jewish students and educators, including many of our members, feeling unsafe in their schools and of Jewish parents being fearful of sending their children to school due to the rise of antisemitism across the country and around the world. No child or family should feel the need to choose between their education or their safety, and no educator should feel unsafe in their workplace due to discrimination.

As schools and communities work to address antisemitism and other forms of hate and discrimination based on religion, culture, national origin, shared ancestry, and ethnic characteristics, we urge Congress to adopt policies that help foster safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environments and communities for all students, families, and educators.

All students have the right to freely express their identities while receiving a well-rounded, uncensored public education curriculum. Additionally, NASP maintains that schools have an obligation to meet the unique educational and social needs of students by implementing culturally responsive practices and including meaningful and positive representations of diverse and minoritized populations. Unfortunately, the rights of Jewish students are compromised, and schools fail to meet their obligation when antisemitic discrimination occurs and is not responded to in an expeditious, thoughtful manner consistent with best anti-discrimination practices. Schools must ensure they revisit
their anti-discrimination policies and response plans, revise them as needed to strengthen protections for Jewish students (as well as other groups who are currently being affected by the spike in discriminatory acts), and educate all members of the school community of these policies and their rights under Title VI and the First Amendment. It is also important to incorporate positive representations of Jewish history and cultures, as well as developmentally appropriate knowledge about the historic persecution and marginalization of Jewish people around the world, into classroom curricula. Jewish people have a storied history and diverse cultures, and they have made countless contributions to this country and the world that should be acknowledged and celebrated in our schools.

Understanding the perspectives, cultures, and lived experiences of others is foundational to the learning process, as it fosters empathy and respect and challenges discriminatory and hateful beliefs. Inclusive and nondiscriminatory educational settings are also associated with positive educational, social, and cognitive outcomes for all students, as well as positive long-term educational, economic, and civic outcomes. It is imperative that we empower teachers to establish learning environments that facilitate respectful dialogue where all students feel safe and supported, help students understand and respect the identities of their peers by incorporating diverse perspectives in their curriculum, and provide an honest and accurate assessment of history. These practices can, and should, be used to support Jewish students, educators, and families and to foster a positive school climate in which discrimination of any kind is not tolerated.

Discrimination, harassment, and actual or perceived lack of safety have serious negative effects on mental health, and the current rise in antisemitism is significantly affecting Jewish students’ mental health, individually and as a community. NASP strongly supports efforts that affirm and support the civil rights, well-being, and mental health needs of all students, and which do so in a responsive way to students’ cultures and unique needs. In addition to supporting individual students and families affected by antisemitism, access to school-based mental health professionals and comprehensive school mental health services acts as preventative factor to discrimination, harassment, and violence in schools. As such, we urge Congress to continue to support investments that expand access to school mental health professionals and comprehensive services.

Additionally, NASP and school psychologists actively promote partnerships between families and schools, working with school leaders to create equitable and accessible systems in which the diverse perspectives of all families are sought, acknowledged, and valued. Federally funded Statewide Family Engagement Centers provide technical assistance to SEAs and LEAs to improve family—school engagement and partnerships. We urge Congress and the Department of Education to ensure these centers explicitly include technical assistance and guidance on increasing engagement and partnerships with Jewish parents, families, and community members, to better support Jewish students—and all other students—as well as work to prevent antisemitism and discrimination and address it forcefully when it does occur.

Lastly, NASP has long advocated for Congress to increase funding for the Office of Civil Rights in order to strengthen federal oversight of civil rights protections in our schools and increase support and technical assistance for schools and districts as they strive to create learning environments free of violence, discrimination, harassment, and bullying. OCR has long been underfunded, leading to delays in investigations of reported discrimination. We implore the Members of this Subcommittee, and the rest of Congress, to support, at a minimum, the President’s FY 2025 budget request for $162 million—a $22 million increase in funding—for OCR. This will support the hiring of 86 additional investigators, which is greatly needed considering the surge in Title VI complaints received since October 7, 2023 and the unprecedented increase in total complaints, which have tripled since 2003.

We appreciate the Subcommittee’s consideration of this testimony, and we welcome opportunities to work with Congress to protect Jewish students and other minoritized youth from identity-based discrimination, harassment, and
bullying in our schools and communities. If you have any questions, please contact NASP's Director of Policy and Advocacy, Dr. Kelly Vaillancourt Strobach (kvaillancourt@naspweb.org).

Sincerely,

Kathleen Minke, PhD, NCSP
Executive Director
National Association of School Psychologists