

Garfield High School
400 23rd Ave
Seattle, WA 98122
April 30, 2021

Governor Jay Inslee
200 Legislative Building
Olympia, Washington 98504

Dear Governor Inslee,

I am writing to you out of necessity to make you see why it is vital for the harrowing epoch known as the Holocaust to be required education in all Washington schools. Teaching the Holocaust fosters intelligent discussions, honors the dead and the surviving, and strengthens our humanity. To not teach the Holocaust would be to do a disservice to the memories of the past and the peace of the future. As written in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, by James Loewen, “Understanding the past is central to our ability to understand ourselves and the world around us.” If there is any era for which this statement is most accurate, it is the Holocaust.

When the Holocaust is taught in schools, it creates environments hospitable to important discussions on humanity, history, religion, sociology, and more. In classrooms teaching the Holocaust I have had deep conversations on the relevance of religion, the depth of strength, the power of resistance, and the significance of life.

The history of the Holocaust provides us with an opportunity to dig deeper and not only ask ‘who?’, ‘what?’, and ‘when?’, but also ‘how?’ and ‘why?’.

During a Holocaust unit in 7th grade, I learned about the Pyramid of Hate. This concept helps us understand the progression of hate from bias to genocide. I had never learned about the pyramid until learning about the Holocaust and talking about it in class helped me to see how small actions and biases are the foundation of the extreme acts of violence that strike us. It can be difficult to reconcile with the fact that we all exist somewhere on the pyramid because no one wants to be accused of contributing to hate. But in learning about the pyramid, we are able to recognize our biases, so we can try to eliminate or, in the least, control them.

In a Holocaust unit in 9th grade, we discussed the Milgram experiments. Stanley Milgram, in response to the trial of SS officer Adolf Eichmann, wondered how far a person would go when told by authority to hurt someone. He tested the line between obedience and autonomy. He asked of the millions of people who carried out Hitler’s plans, “Could we call them

all accomplices?" (Milgram, 1974). Discussing the questions that Milgram asked about humanity (and the answers he found) raises our comprehension of why people committed atrocious acts.

Requisite teaching of the Holocaust invites vital conversations that help us understand the 'how?' and 'why?' behind genocide, so we can stop ourselves from blindly climbing the Pyramid of Hate.

By telling the stories of the Holocaust in the classroom, teachers and students are honoring the lives and experiences of the victims and survivors. To me, honoring someone means recognizing who they are, what they experienced, and the impact they have had. It is crucial that the stories we are told from this period are the stories of Jewish survivors and resisters, not just the nationalistic hero stories of the American liberators. This means reading stories like *Night*, by Elie Wiesel. The *New York Times* calls Wiesel's book, "A slim volume of terrifying power." This is because it is a testimony. It is a truth about human strength and human weakness. A truth that needs to be faced.

By sharing stories, we are sharing the burden of human suffering and therefore lightening the load on our collective species. However, it does not have to be a story of suffering to have an impact on the world. As Otto Frank says of Anne Frank's famously touching diary, "...the diary covered so many areas of life that every reader found something in it that affected him personally." Finding connection with victims of the Holocaust strengthens our empathy, but we cannot find those connections unless we hear their stories. Textbooks tell facts, but people tell histories. Reading the stories of Holocaust survivors and victims has taught me that listening to someone's story, whether it be one of agony, hope, anger, or joy, is the most humane act one person can do for another. This lesson, for the good of our world, must be required for all people to learn.

The recognition of and reckoning with the Holocaust forces us to truly examine our humanity in the most extreme environment. Exposing ourselves to the suffering of other humans allows us to recognize our privilege and comprehend the need for compassion. There are many helpful, relevant, and interesting events I have learned about in school, however, none but the Holocaust have made me so achingly in touch with my mortal soul.

While reading the book, *Night*, I often asked myself the question: How many times do you have to see something horrible for it to become normal? Wiesel recalls standing emaciated in a cattle car on a transport to Buchenwald while passing through German towns. "German laborers were going to work. They would stop and look at us without surprise" (100). Was it

easier for those Germans to think of the Jews as less than human than to cope with the grief of watching them suffer? This anecdote strengthened my desire to be compassionate instead of becoming numb to suffering because indifferent people don't make change.

Another account that struck me was that of Ann Birulin, a Polish survivor, who spent what would have been her high school years working in a slave labor camp in Germany. I, being a high schooler, feel connected to Birulin's narrative, making it natural for me to empathize and draw connections between her and I. Her story made me wonder about the extent of my own strength. Would I have been able to survive like she did? Does it take the worst circumstances to bring out the best in us?

My Holocaust education has done more than teach me facts and timelines. It has taught me about what it means to be human in the most inhumane circumstances. This is the kind of education that should be required for all students in Washington.

People may ask, 'Why the Holocaust, specifically?' It is unfortunately true that there are other massacres, such as those in Cambodia and Ethiopia, that could be used as platforms for discussions on human rights, genocide, and the Pyramid of Hate. Some even may argue that the Pyramid of Hate can be taught to children without exposing them to the extreme examples of violence and suffering experienced in the Holocaust.

I believe that in general our curriculum could use more histories of events offering insight into hate and its consequences. However, the Holocaust offers the best example of how our personal biases can be exploited at the expense of other people's lives. Other genocides in history were often instigated and carried out by the government and the military within the borders of a country. Although the same is basically true for the Holocaust, there is another depth to the hate that allowed it to happen. I come again to Ann Birulin, who on return to Poland after liberation was met with antisemitism so extreme that some Poles were killing their returning Jewish countrymen. Another example of this indoctrinated aversion was the Hitler Youth. As stated in the United States Holocaust Museum's Encyclopedia, "In 1939, more than 82% of eligible youth (age 10-18) belonged to the Hitler Youth or its female equivalent, the League of German Girls." Hitler's hate stretched far beyond the borders of Germany, and his antisemitic propaganda was so strong that he was breeding hate amongst children. The Holocaust is the most extreme example of how quickly and thoroughly hate can be entrenched in people so that they are okay with murder in their backyards-if they are not doing it themselves.

We feel safe in our modern delusions that 'it's not that bad' or 'they deserve it', but that safety is an illusion because it makes us believe that what we do or how we think is inconsequential. Humans must learn from a young age that our actions, our words, and our thoughts have repercussions. It must be established in us that being an ignorant bystander, or worse a hateful conspirator, is not an option.

Conclusively, it is pertinent that the Holocaust be mandated study for Washington students so they may discuss important questions, respect the dead and surviving, and explore themselves in the context of society. We cannot let the lives of millions have been mercilessly taken without acknowledging the Holocaust as a warning of the danger of ignorance, propaganda, anger, and hate.

Governor Inslee, I implore you to take a stand for the past and future of humanity in December 2022. I beseech you to require all young people to face their history. Use your power to not be an ignorant bystander because your choices make a difference for our future.

This is a cycle. We hurt, we hate, we harm others. People die, people resist, people survive. We apologize, we admonish, we say never again. We say the past is in the past, we say forgive and forget. So, we forget. And the cycle begins anew.

Please, do not let us forget.

Sincerely,
Madeleine Smith

Works Cited

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