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MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education
From: Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner
Date: January 22, 2024
Subject: Fostering a Safe Learning Environment for All Students

Recent reports on the rise of antisemitism and Islamophobia in the U.S. and beyond have prompted a review of resources that state and federal leaders are providing to support schools in fostering a safe, inclusive learning environment for all students. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE or Department) continues to collaborate on these issues with the Governor's Office, the Executive Office of Education, the Office of the Attorney General, and federal agencies.

This memorandum provides an overview of guidance for Massachusetts schools on preventing and addressing hate and bias incidents, as well as relevant elements of the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks and other resources to educate and support students.

The Department's work is grounded in our Educational Vision.

Educational Vision

Our goal is that as a result of their public education in Massachusetts, students will:

- **Attain academic knowledge and skills:** achieve in a comprehensive and diverse range of subjects and apply their competencies in relevant, real-world contexts.
- **Understand and value self:** know their own strengths, interests, and areas of growth, be self-aware, be a self-advocate, and make responsible decisions.
- **Understand and value others:** understand differences and multiple perspectives, empathize with others, and build connections with peers and adults.
- **Engage with the world:** understand and think critically about local, national, and world events and societal systems and create positive change through civic action.

So that they can:

- **Be curious and creative:** find joy in learning, pursue their interests, and use innovative thinking to approach opportunities and solve challenges, including those previously unseen.
- **Shape their path:** be well prepared to thrive in college and/or career and be positioned for lifelong learning.
- **Feel connected:** see themselves as valuable and involved members of their communities and be aware of their independence and interdependence.

- **Be empowered:** play a role in advocating for equity, justice, and liberty in their communities and beyond.

1. Guidance and Resources on Preventing and Addressing Hate and Bias Incidents

The Department provides guidance, resources, and information to school officials and others about federal and state civil rights laws that protect students from discrimination and harassment and provides resources and guidance on violence prevention. These include the following.

- The U.S. Department of Education (USED) Office for Civil Rights published a [Dear Colleague Letter](#) and [additional online resources](#) in November 2023 to address the rise in reports of antisemitic, Islamophobic, and other hate- or bias-based incidents at schools and colleges. The letter reminds educational institutions that receive federal financial assistance of their legal obligations to provide all students – including those who are or are perceived to be Jewish, Israeli, Muslim, Arab, or Palestinian – a learning environment that is free from discrimination based on race, color, or national origin.
- In November 2023, the National Center for Safe and Supportive Learning Environments, a technical assistance center funded by USED, released a collection of specialized [resources for schools](#), designed to help educators, students, parents, and community members prevent antisemitism, Islamophobia, and related forms of discrimination.
- In December 2023, U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona hosted a [webinar](#) on how PK-12 schools ([remarks](#) and [video](#)) can support students and foster a safe, inclusive learning environment. The webinar presented resources to help respond to the rise in reports of antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-Arab hate, and other forms of discrimination. Additionally, USED’s [Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships](#) has online resources for preventing and addressing [antisemitism](#) and [Islamophobia](#) in schools.
- DESE has disseminated USED’s recent guidance, resources, and webinars to public school leaders in Massachusetts.
- DESE worked with the Massachusetts Office of the Attorney General on the [Attorney General's Guidance to Schools on Hate and Bias Incidents](#), which provides guidance to school officials about their legal obligations to prevent and address hate and bias incidents at their schools and includes resources to help schools respond properly if such an incident occurs. DESE will continue to work with the Office of the Attorney General, the Governor’s Office, and the Executive Office of Education on any updates to this guidance.
- [Addressing Hate in School Sports](#) is a collaborative project among the Office of the Attorney General, DESE, the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association, and the Massachusetts School Administrators’ Association to provide training and support to school and athletic

officials across Massachusetts.

- [The Governor's Task Force on Hate Crimes: 2019 Education Recommendations](#) is another resource to help schools establish and reinforce a positive climate for all students, families, and staff, and deal with incidents of hate and bias promptly and effectively.
- DESE's violence prevention [webpage](#) includes information and resources about hate crime prevention and intervention, with links to evidence-based curricula and best practices to create and sustain safe and supportive schools for all.
- Through Coordinated Program Reviews, DESE assesses school districts' compliance with education requirements, including selected federal and state civil rights requirements. Resources for districts include the Civil Rights Tool Kit: [LEA Equity Activity Guide and CR 24/25 Toolkit from The Office of Public School Monitoring](#). These resources can help district and school staff deepen their understanding of bias and how to counteract it, promote cultural competency for staff, and foster a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students.

2. Key Elements of Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and Other Resources to Educate and Support Students

The Massachusetts curriculum frameworks provide teachers, students, and families with clear and shared expectations for what all students should know and be able to do at the end of each year. They represent a promise of equitable education for all students in formalizing the expectation that all students in the Commonwealth have access to the same academic content that will lead to positive outcomes in college and career.

History and Social Science Curriculum Framework

The [2018 History and Social Science \(HSS\) Framework](#) sets the foundational expectation that all Massachusetts students will be educated in the histories of the Commonwealth, the United States, and the world. Students will be prepared to make informed civic choices and assume their responsibility for strengthening equality, justice, and liberty in and beyond the United States (p.9). The Framework is rooted in 10 Guiding Principles. Guiding Principle 2 states:

An effective history and social science education incorporates diverse perspectives and acknowledges that perceptions of events are affected by race, ethnicity, culture, religion, education, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, and personal experience. The traditional motto of the United States is “E pluribus unum” – out of many, one. A history and social science education that does justice to the remarkable diversity of our country must tell the histories of individuals and groups, and honor a plurality of life stories while acknowledging our ongoing struggle to achieve a more perfect union. Teaching how the concepts of freedom, equality, the rule of law, and human rights have influenced United States and world history necessarily involves discussions of race, ethnicity, culture, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, and

other characteristics. Effective instruction challenges students to value their own heritage while embracing our common ideals and shared experiences as they develop their own rigorous thinking about accounts of events. Effective instruction celebrates the progress the United States has made in embracing diversity, while at the same time encouraging honest and informed academic discussions about prejudice, racism, and bigotry in the past and present. Race and racism are part of America’s complicated history, and a complete history and social science education must include an honest examination of prejudice, bigotry, and oppression in the past and present. (Massachusetts 2018 History and Social Science Curriculum Framework, page 13).

Guiding Principle 2 of the framework states that effective history and social science instruction “celebrates the progress the United States has made in embracing diversity, while at the same time encouraging honest and informed academic discussions about prejudice, racism, and bigotry in the past and present.” To this end, the framework’s content standards not only address instances of racial oppression and prejudice in age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate ways, but also highlight the individuals and movements who have challenged it. These standards also address the way in which diversity has been and continues to be a strength of our nation.

Some representative examples of content include:

- 6.T3.e-f: History of ancient Israel and the ancient Arabian Peninsula; historical relationships between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity; belief systems of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam
- 6.T4.b: Islam in sub-Saharan Africa, 100-1000 CE
- USII.T2.4: Ideologies in the United States in the early 20th century, includes antisemitism in the United States
- WHI.T2: Development and diffusion of religions and systems of belief c. 500 BCE-1200 CE
- WHII.T4: The Great Wars, 1914-1945; includes the rise of antisemitism and racist ideologies in Europe; history of the Holocaust
- WHII.T5: The Cold War Era, 1945-1991; background for the establishment of the modern state of Israel, including antisemitism and the Holocaust and various topics related to religious diversity
- WHII.T7: The politics of difference among people; includes topics related to the causes of genocide and mass atrocities

Additionally, the framework urges history and social science teachers of all grade levels to include discussions of current events, which may include issues of race and racism, as part of their instruction. As emphasized in Guiding Principle 8, history and social science teachers “have a unique responsibility to help students consider events—including current events—in a broad historical, geographical, social, or economic context.”

The Department provides resources to support the implementation of the framework, including the supplement to the 2018 framework, which contains resources for facilitating classroom conversations about race, identity, and oppression and other discussions that might be politically charged. Additional resources include [Race, Racism, and Culturally Responsive Teaching in](#)

[History and Social Science in Massachusetts: Frequently Asked Questions](#) and an FAQ on [Genocide Education in Massachusetts](#).

Genocide Education

[An Act Concerning Genocide Education](#) (Acts of 2021, c. 98) was signed into law in December 2021 “to ensure every school district provides instruction on the history of genocide” and aimed to:

- (i) promote the teaching of human rights issues in all public schools and school districts, with particular attention to the study of the inhumanity of genocide;
- (ii) address the history and patterns of genocide that demonstrate how hatred against national, ethnic, racial or religious groups impacts nations and societies; and
- (iii) reject the targeting of a specific population and other forms of prejudice that can lead to violence and genocide.

The law requires all middle and high schools to provide instruction related to genocide. The Department has awarded \$1.2 million in [genocide education grant funding](#) in FY23 and has allocated an additional \$1.25 million for FY24 and FY25 to enhance instruction related to genocide. Schools are using these funds to purchase curricular materials, professional development, and/or enrichment activities (e.g., museum visits) for students.

A guide to K-12 social studies curricular materials, developed in collaboration with the Rennie Center, will be posted on DESE’s webpage. One part of this guide includes culturally responsive supplemental curricular resources for middle and high schools, including recommended resources that specifically address antisemitism and Islamophobia.

The Department is working with a research partner to conduct an evaluation of current practices in genocide education across the Commonwealth. This evaluation will inform future projects, which might include the development of additional resources, guidance, and/or professional learning opportunities for teachers.

Comprehensive Health and Physical Education Curriculum Framework

The [2023 MA Comprehensive Health and Physical Education \(CHPE\) Curriculum Framework](#) promotes comprehensive health literacy for all Massachusetts students, with recent revisions articulating social and emotional competencies, emphasizing the importance of media literacy as a component of health and well-being, and including a trauma-sensitive perspective that supports and encourages students in their learning while recognizing that students bring individual and unique needs to the classroom. Anti-bullying and discrimination guidance can be found in Guiding Principle 3 and in Healthy Relationships under Practice 3: social awareness, relationship, and communication skills.

Guiding Principle 3: Effective Comprehensive Health and Physical Education programs incorporate diverse perspectives and acknowledge that attainment of equity and optimal health are individualized, contextual, and affected by intersections of race, ethnicity, culture, religion, education, economic condition, gender identity, sexual orientation, dis/ability, personal experience, and many other factors.

Practice 3: social awareness, relationship, and communication skills: The Standards outline sets of learning objectives related to topics of bullying, teasing, and interpersonal skills. The focus is on promoting understanding, empathy, and respectful behavior in various social situations. The standards cover areas such as defining and differentiating bullying and teasing, identifying characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships, understanding boundaries, and addressing conflicts effectively. Additionally, it emphasizes acknowledging diversity, demonstrating empathy, and recognizing the impact of stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, and injustice. The goal is to equip individuals with the skills to navigate social interactions positively and contribute to healthy relationship dynamics.

Below are some relevant standards, indicating the grade band, practice number, topic, and standard number:

- 2.3.HR.1: Define bullying and teasing, explain similarities and differences and how both can be harmful.
- 2.3.HR.8: Acknowledge diversity, including (but not limited to) racial, ethnic, religious, dis/ability and cultural differences and traditions, demonstrate respect for others, and demonstrate empathy and ways to treat all people with dignity and respect.
- 5.3.HR.4: Differentiate between conflict and bullying and articulate the importance of the difference to avoid escalating conflicts into bullying or violence.
- 5.3.HR.11: Describe ways that stereotypes, perceived stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, inequality, and injustice can impact relationships and demonstrate strategies to address these factors.
- 5.7.CE.7: Demonstrate ways to treat people – including other students, their family members, and members of the school community – with dignity, respect, and empathy without regard to race, color, sex, gender identity, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, or personal characteristics such as body shape or weight.
- 8.3.HR.10: Describe potential impacts of power and privilege (such as those associated with age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, socioeconomic status, immigration status, ability, position of authority) within a variety of relationships and in various settings.
- 8.7.MH.7: Evaluate strategies for opposing, reducing, or eliminating stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and injustice.
- 8.7.MH.8: Encourage others to refrain from teasing or bullying others based on personal characteristics (e.g., race, national origin, disability, body shape or weight) or personal values and beliefs.
- 12.3.HR.1: Explain why it is harmful to disrespect others who have differing views and beliefs and demonstrate positive ways to express understanding of differing perspectives.
- 12.3.HR.7: Demonstrate empathy (e.g., active listening, withholding judgement, compassion) toward others.

Safe and Supportive Schools Framework

The [Safe and Supportive Schools \(SaSS\) Framework and Self-Reflection Tool \(Tool\)](#) was

created by DESE in consultation with the [Safe and Supportive Schools Commission](#), per the [Safe and Supportive Schools Framework Law](#) (M.G.L. c. 69, s. 1P). The framework and tool are optional resources that can help school-based teams create plans to build a safer and more supportive school climate and culture based on their student needs and opportunities, school operations, personnel, processes, policies, family connections, and community partnerships. [Essential Elements](#) include helping all students feel safe – physically, socially, emotionally, behaviorally, and academically – as well as valuing students’ identities and dismantling implicit biases and systemic inequalities. The Department offers a Safe and Supportive Schools [grant program](#) and associated [professional development](#) to help local communities make their schools safer and more supportive.