



*Government Relations • Israel Advocacy • Intergroup Relations •  
Social Justice • Maryland • Virginia • Washington, DC •*

*Since 1938*



## **Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington (JCRC) Comments on the District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) Draft Social & Emotional Learning Standards January 22, 2024**

---

The Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington (JCRC) provides these comments in response to the DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) request for public feedback on the Draft Social & Emotional Learning Standards. We are specifically commenting on the section regarding social and cultural awareness.

The JCRC is the public affairs arm of the organized Jewish community, representing over 100 synagogues, community centers, and social service agencies throughout DC, Maryland, and Virginia, including nearly 20 in the District alone.

We advocate on many issues that promote rights and protections for Jewish Americans and for all people regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or other identity. We champion the cause of the most vulnerable members of our society, through advocacy for our network of non-sectarian Jewish social service agencies, interfaith and intergroup outreach, and other legislative and grassroots initiatives. Education outreach is a critical component of this work. An overwhelming majority of Jewish children in our region attend public schools; we work independently and in coalitions to ensure that schools are safe and welcoming for all students, and that all children have an equal opportunity to realize their full potential. Judaism is not only a religion – Jews share an [ethno-religious identity](#) and shared connection to a common ancestral homeland. Jewish people are an ethnic group who practice a religion, Judaism. There are also people who convert to Judaism or people who identify as Jewish but do not practice the religion.

Based on our work with schools of all levels in DC, we applaud the goals of these standards. We recommend that religious and ethnic identities be included in the final standards. Issues of religious- and nationality-based harassment have increased in DC schools and nationwide, over the last few years, especially since October 7, 2023. These issues can be addressed by social and cultural awareness training. The JCRC works with educators and school communities to address religious- and nationality-based harassment by students and teachers alike towards Jewish and Israeli students.

According to the [Federal Bureau of Investigations \(FBI\)](#), nearly 60% of religion-based hate crimes were driven by antisemitism in 2022. Nationwide, at least 20% of those reported antisemitic incidents took place at a school or public playground. Over the last 18 months, JCRC has engaged intensively with at least two DC public schools to address conflicts between students, parents, and teachers regarding antisemitic incidents: Watkins Elementary School and Jackson-Reed High School.

At Watkins Elementary School in December 2022, a librarian had third graders reenact concentration camp scenes from the Holocaust. This was extremely disturbing to students and parents and generated the need

for difficult conversations on appropriate remediation. JCRC met with the school principal to review educational resources available to teachers and students and hosted a community webinar gathering with mental health experts from the Jewish Social Services Agency. JCRC led discussions on the webinar with parents on how to talk to children about the Holocaust at such a young age. At Jackson-Reed High School, since October 7, 2023, students and teachers have struggled with how to address antisemitic and nationality-based harassment of Jewish and Israeli students. School teachers and administrators are working hard to find the right strategies to address student actions that are harmful to fellow teens and create deep division within the school. JCRC continues to work with school administrators, who are eager to find the right tools and resources to help their community.

Based on these incidents and other experiences, we urge OSSE to include religious and nationality awareness in the section, "Social and Cultural Awareness," at all grade levels using age-appropriate materials.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback and we look forward to continuing discussions in the coming months.

Respectfully,



Rachel Feinstein  
Director of DC Government and Community Relations  
Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington  
Phone: 202-936-3864  
Email: [rfeinstein@jcouncil.org](mailto:rfeinstein@jcouncil.org)