

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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State Office Building
House Hearing on Proposed Bill HF 2685:
Genocide Education about the Holocaust,
Indigenous Genocide and other Genocides
100 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
Saint Paul, MN 55155

March 20, 2023

Dear Chair Cheryl Youakim, Republican Lead Ron Kresha, and Members of the Education Finance Committee;

“Why have we never learned about this before?” This question was asked by a high school junior in my Genocide and Human Rights course just last week as we began learning about the Cambodian Genocide. The student, a second-generation Hmong-American whose family members experienced mass violence and came to the United States as refugees, is often frustrated that, until my course, her education has excluded most of the genocides we are covering in the course. Quite frankly, as her teacher, I am also frustrated and disheartened that most of my students have little knowledge of these events and the broader patterns of genocide. Thus, I am writing to support HF 2685 and Holocaust and genocide education in the State of Minnesota. As both a middle and high school social studies teacher and a scholar in the field of Social Studies Education, I have seen firsthand through my teaching and research the power of Holocaust and genocide education.

I am currently nearing the completion of my 17th year as a classroom teacher. I have taught social studies at every grade from 5th through 12th in public, charter, and private schools in urban, suburban, and rural communities in Minnesota and Wisconsin, as well as two years in Vienna, Austria. As a teacher, I have seen firsthand the unique power of Holocaust and genocide education to engender attitudes of tolerance, justice, and citizenship within a pluralistic democracy. While students often come into my class curious about the topics, they leave inspired to seek a better world both locally and globally. I have also seen how teaching about genocide and mass violence, especially cases that are often absent from middle and high school social studies classes, can affirm students’ (and their families’) identities and lived experiences, as is the case for so many of my students from communities that have experienced mass violence. This is so important for Minnesota, as new and existing refugee and migrant communities seek to see themselves reflected in education and the state more broadly. Importantly, learning about Indigenous genocide provides opportunities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to better understand the history of the state and begin to imagine and work towards a more just future.

However, like most social studies teachers, I came to the profession with little awareness of other genocides and limited knowledge of the Holocaust. Early in my career, when a principal asked that I develop and teach a high school elective course on the Holocaust, I began to seek out professional development opportunities, largely through the University of Minnesota’s Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies (CHGS). Through CHGS’s summer institutes, I was exposed to other cases of genocide, such as those in Armenia, Ukraine, Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia. Importantly, I also learned from scholars and community members about the genocide of the Dakota and Ho-Chunk and the violence perpetrated against the Ojibwe. Soon my Holocaust course expanded

to include these and other cases of genocide. HF 2685 stands apart from Holocaust and genocide education in other states in its support of funding for professional

development for teachers, who will seek out and use these opportunities to create meaningful learning experiences for their students.

In 2022, I completed my Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction and Social Studies Education, with a minor in Human Rights, at the University of Minnesota. Broadly, my research examines genocide education in high school social studies classrooms and curricula. My dissertation joins a growing body of research that shows the benefits of Holocaust and genocide education. My research also shows the power of legislation in strengthening and advancing Holocaust and genocide education in states which have adopted mandates. In Wisconsin, a newly implemented Holocaust and genocide mandate has spurred tremendous growth in professional development opportunities for teachers, and I have received dozens of requests to share my syllabus and resources with middle and high school teachers who are developing and teaching their own courses or weaving genocide into their existing social studies courses. Specific legislation places importance on the topic.

I drafted all of the language related to the Holocaust and genocide in the 2021 Minnesota K-12 Social Studies Standards. While I laud the work of the standards committee in securing and expanding genocide education in Minnesota for years to come, I also recognize the limitations of the state's teaching and learning standards. HF 2685 provides additional, essential safeguards and opportunities to secure and expand genocide education. Naming specific genocides matters. It ensures genocide education about and, importantly, beyond the Holocaust, including Indigenous genocide. Likewise codifying this language in legislation expresses an enduring recognition of the importance and commitment to genocide education within the state.

HF 2685 is an important piece of legislation for Minnesota's teachers and, especially, students. For students, this legislation will advance attitudes of tolerance, justice, and citizenship within a pluralistic democracy, affirm their and their families' identities and lived experiences, and provide a step towards truth-telling in terms of Indigenous genocide within the state. For teachers, this legislation supports professional development opportunities and resources to ensure appropriate and responsible education. The community support for this legislation speaks to the importance of genocide education for Minnesotans of many different backgrounds. Perhaps, the most powerful call for such legislation is from my students when they ask: "Why have we never learned about this before?" This question speaks to the pressing need for such legislation.

Sincerely,

George D. Dalbo, Ph.D.
High School Social Studies Teacher