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Preparing for the Anniversary of October 7: Guidance for K-12 Public & Independent Schools

Issue Brief

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Summary

October 7th is the anniversary of the attack on Israel during which terrorists murdered 1,185 people, took 251 civilians hostage, and sparked the current war in Gaza. The tragedy has inspired strong feelings and, unfortunately, antisemitism. Many Jewish and other families are still grieving or shaken by the events.

In 2025, October 7 falls during the Jewish holiday of Sukkot. Some Jewish students may be absent for their religious observance, while other Jewish students may still attend school. Victims of the October 7 attacks also included non-Jews, including Bedouins, Arab Israelis, and immigrants and workers in Israel, including many Thai students and workers, and it is possible there are families beyond the Jewish families in your community who were affected as well.

Schools choosing to commemorate the attack must ensure that such commemorations are appropriate and respectful of the nature of the day, and should hold commemorations on a date when all Jewish students can attend, such as during the day on October 6th or on a date the week prior.

October 7 is a day of mourning for the brutal Hamas attack. Conflating it with the broader, ongoing war, through protests, anti-war activities, or otherwise, is inappropriate, just as it would be for Holocaust Remembrance Day or a U.S. Memorial Day commemoration.

Background

On October 7, 2023, on the Jewish holiday of Shemini Atzeret, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other Palestinian terrorists entered Israel, murdering 1,185 individuals, injuring over 5,400 and abducting 251 hostages, ranging in age from 6 months to 86 years old and including 30 American citizens. The attacks were marked by torture and sexual violence, targeting babies, children, adults and the elderly. As of September 2025, 48 hostages are still held in Gaza, approximately 20 of whom are believed to still be alive.

In response to the unprecedented terrorist attacks, Israel launched a war against the Hamas government and its extensive armed forces in Gaza. The Gaza Strip is a small territory, and Hamas fighters frequently embed themselves in the civilian population, in schools, hospitals and individuals' homes, greatly increasing the likelihood of civilian casualties. Without question, the people of Gaza have suffered during this war, but the blame properly falls on Hamas which



initiated the conflict, refuses to release the hostages, and cynically uses its own people as strategic pawns. Israel regularly makes efforts to warn and protect civilians, a task made more difficult by Hamas tactics.



In the Classroom

Allowing teachers or faculty to pick sides in this geopolitical conflict invites conflict, with both ethical and legal ramifications. Teachers discussing the war should be careful to present a nuanced and balanced perspective, placing recent events in some historical context. Even that historical context, while necessary, can be fraught, as competing narratives can be seen as denying one side's historical claims. Some suggested resources for framing education and classroom discussion are as follows:

- [Fostering Civil Discourse](#) – How do we talk about issues that matter (Facing History and Ourselves)
- [Head, Heart Conscious \(Facing History and Ourselves\)](#)
- [Support for Classroom discussion on the Israel-Hamas War \(Institute for Curriculum Studies\)](#)
- [Speakers and facilitation by ConnectED](#)

Teachers have a special obligation to ensure that they do not tolerate nor themselves engage in acts of antisemitism, including overt hostility to Israel or Zionist beliefs.

School systems and school districts must ensure that their curricula do not promote antisemitism nor bias against Israel or Zionism.



Commemorations

At the elementary school level, students may have varying amounts of information about the conflict. Schools may choose to use the anniversary of the attack as an opportunity to practice kindness and cultural sensitivity, shining a light in the face of many losses.

Secondary schools wishing to mark the anniversary of October 7th more explicitly may consider an assembly or school-wide program. Your local Jewish Federation can make recommendations for appropriate speakers and presentations. Programming considerations may also include a moment of silence and opportunities for journaling. Additional resources and suggestions are available via the [American Jewish Committee guidance](#) for schools.

Protests, rallies, and anti-war events frequently have led to intimidation and antisemitism and should be avoided. Care must be taken that the grief and loss of the October 7th attack is not superseded by mourning for other losses.

Schools should not feel an obligation to create programming for the anniversary of October 7th, but they do have an obligation to ensure that all their students feel safe and supported.

The American Academy of Pediatrics and UNICEF both caution against oversharing graphic descriptions of violence with children. These organizations also recommend that adults remind children to avoid graphic images, videos or sounds on the news or social media outlets.



Supporting Jewish Students

For many Jewish people, the existence of the State of Israel has profound religious, historic and/or geopolitical significance. Founded in the wake of the Holocaust – the culmination of two millennia of persecution and murder – and immediately followed by persecution and expulsion of 800,000 Jews from Arab and majority-Muslim countries, the State of Israel represents a safe haven for the Jewish People, a country to which Jews from around the world can escape when they face violence or the threat of violence. More than that, for many Jews, Israel is the fulfillment of an age-old dream of a reborn Jewish homeland and the one place the Jewish people can rule themselves and chart their collective future. Jewish text and liturgy focus on Jewish connections to and yearning for the land of Israel, which includes the faith's holiest sites.

The attacks of October 7 diminished that sense of safety and the promise that the persecutions of the past would not be repeated. Jews came to see that Israel, too, might not always be safe. The October 7th attack also sparked a dramatic increase in antisemitic incidents and hateful rhetoric against Jewish communities around the world, accelerating an already alarming trend in recent years.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act prohibits exclusion, discrimination, or denial of benefits based on an individual's race, color or national origin, including their shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics. Schools, from pre-K through high school, have a legal and moral obligation to provide all students with a safe learning environment, free from bullying, harassment and other forms of abuse based on students' racial, ethnic, or national background, among others. In May, 2024, the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights issued a [Dear Colleague](#) letter explaining the ramifications of this law in light of the current conflict in Gaza.

Jewish students, like all students, should never be made to feel ashamed for their religion, ethnicity, or connections to the region, nor should they be blamed for or associated with policies of foreign governments or organizations.

School officials must take Jewish students' complaints seriously, must investigate alleged acts of hatred, and must take appropriate action to prevent future occurrences.

Consider reaching out to Jewish families in your community in advance of the anniversary of October 7th to see how they are doing and if they are in need of support. School social workers may play a role here, as well.



Ensure that there are spaces for students to grieve and receive support. Be especially mindful of posters, signs, flags or other messaging in areas where students may go for private moments of support, including offices and counseling facilities.

Some students and families may choose to be absent from school on the anniversary of October 7, whether to mourn or out of concern for personal safety. Consider allowing an exempt absence for those students. Ensure that major school events are not held on or after school on that date.

Notably, the October 7 attack took place on the Jewish holiday of *Shemini Atzeret*. Its timing therefore also occurs during the fall Jewish holiday season. Ensure that students' religious needs are accommodated appropriately.



Preparation for Protest Activity

Brief all staff about the potential for high-tension situations. Emphasize the importance of prompt de-escalation. Consider having additional adult supervision during unstructured student time (before and after school, passing periods, lunch, recess, etc.)

Schools anticipating a potential walkout can utilize [this guidance from the Jewish Federation of the Bay Area](#).

Educate teachers and staff on rhetoric that has frequently been used in protests that is antisemitic and includes threats of violence against the Jewish community. An extensive guide to this subject can be accessed at the Jewish Federations' resource, [How to Identify Antisemitism: A guide for k-12 educators \(Jewish Federations\)](#). Prominent examples of this problematic rhetoric include:

Some problematic phrases and rhetoric that veer into antisemitism and have been used to incite or threaten violence against Jewish communities include:

- ***From the River to the Sea*** – a phrase included in the Hamas Charter that calls for the destruction of the state of Israel, home to more than half the world's Jewish population, necessarily by violence.
- ***Bring home (or globalize) the Intifada*** – The first and second intifadas were periods of horrific terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians; globalizing it is read as a call for attacks against Jewish civilians worldwide.
- ***Jews are colonialists*** – while there are legitimate political disputes about the Israeli government's actions, the Jewish people are indigenous to the land of Israel and have no other country to 'return' to or colonize from. Claiming that Jews are colonialists denies Jewish history and Jews' own understanding of their historic and religious connections to the land of Israel since the times of the Bible.
- **Holding Jews responsible for the actions of the Israeli government** including by barring Jewish participation in clubs or activities if they refuse to denounce Israel or denying their right to grieve Israeli and Jewish deaths is flatly antisemitic.
- **Traditionally antisemitic tropes** including the idea that Jews control financial, media or government resources; that Jews kill non-Jewish children for ritual purposes or enjoyment; and the utilization of Nazi imagery and language to describe Jews or Judaism.
- **Coded language referring to Jews collectively** such as the use of the word Zionist or Zio as a substitute for Jewish. An example of this might be, "I don't hate Jews, only Zionists."



The overwhelming majority of Jews support Israel's right to exist as a Jewish and democratic state.

- **Ascribing unique evil to Israel or the Israeli people** including the use of double standards that would never be applied to any other state or people and blaming Israel or Israelis for all of the world's evils and trouble, including political and economic inequality.
- **Denying Jews the same rights as other people** including the right to self-determination. For example, telling Jews they have no right to live in Israel and should "go back to Europe" ignores the diversity of the Jewish community and is offensive, telling Jews they belong at the site of the murder of two-thirds of the Jewish population.

