



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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Teaching the Truth About the Holocaust

ELAINE PHILLIPS April 13, 2017

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When New York's top education official recently tried to explain away a high school homework assignment that asked students to defend the Holocaust, it was a pair of teenagers who taught the state a lesson.

The two teens objected when they were directed by their social studies teacher to use "your Nazi point of view" to explain the atrocities leading to the murder of millions of Europe's Jews.

The state's Education Commissioner initially sought to downplay the controversy as an exercise in "critical thinking" but later reversed course, and directed the school district not to repeat the lesson plan.

All of which raises an urgent question: just what are our school children learning about the most horrific crime in modern history?

A recent study by the Anti-Defamation League found that nearly a quarter of Americans had never heard of the Holocaust. More disturbingly, of those who had, one-fifth thought it was a hoax.

At a time when there have been increasing threats and anti-Semitic acts against people of the Jewish faith and Jewish institutions, that kind of ignorance is as frightening as it is dangerous.

New York State is one of just seven states that requires schools to teach students about the Holocaust. But two decades after that rule was enacted, there is no mechanism or review to ensure it's being followed.

That's why I recently introduced legislation requiring the State Education Department to survey school districts across the state, and to take immediate steps to ensure compliance.

Our public schools exist to teach the basics of reading, writing and math, but also "to foster in the children of the state moral and intellectual qualities which are essential in preparing to meet the obligations of citizenship." (Education Law §801)

Understanding and learning from the past changes the future for the better. And a better future is something we all want and deserve.

Two teens used their "critical thinking" to teach us all a valuable lesson about tolerance and understanding. It's now up to us to make sure that lesson is shared with everyone in our society.