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Expand genocide education in schools, group tells Quebec

"We have to give the teachers the time and the space in the curriculum to be able to teach this."

Philip Authier · Montreal Gazette

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22 Comments



Lynne Groulx, then-CEO of the Native Women's Association of Canada, speaks at an event launching a graphic guide to genocide, Monday, June 19, 2023 in Ottawa. The genocide of Indigenous Peoples in Canada is among the topics explored in the Quebec Education Ministry's guide *Studying Genocides*, which has been widely distributed in schools. PHOTO BY ADRIAN WYLD /The Canadian Press files

QUEBEC — A foundation working to ensure better knowledge of genocides is urging the Quebec government to make the subject a mandatory high school curriculum module, including an exam question on the topic for students at the end of the year.



But the government argues the subject is sufficiently covered in three existing high school history and citizenship programs, including the compulsory Contemporary World course offered in senior year.

In light of a recent study showing that less than half (47 per cent) of Quebec teachers say the subject of genocide is incorporated in their school's curriculum, [Foundation for Genocide Education](#) founder Heidi Berger said more has to be done to teach youth.

"One thousand per cent," Berger said when asked if the subject of genocide needs to be given increased attention and made mandatory in high schools. "We have to give the teachers the time and the space in the curriculum to be able to teach this."

"We plan to not let go. It's very important in these times. I mean, with rising tension and antisemitism and the fact a clear majority of teachers wants to teach it, it shows it's really time for Quebec to mandate it."

Berger, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, made her comments in reaction to a [Quebec Liberal policy resolution adopted in May](#) at a party general council. The resolution says that if elected, a Liberal government would make teaching about genocides, including the Holocaust, mandatory in Quebec schools.

Berger said she hopes the Coalition Avenir Québec government takes note of the resolution as well as the findings of the survey of Quebec teachers, conducted in February and March by the foundation in partnership with the Association for Canadian Studies.



"By mandating education on all these genocides, Quebec would be leading the way in North America," says Foundation for Genocide Education founder Heidi Berger. PHOTO BY FOUNDATION FOR GENOCIDE EDUCATION

Researchers polled 200 high school social science and history teachers in Canada about the Holocaust and genocide education. Of the total, nearly 72 per cent of teachers across Canada believe there is a greater urgency to teach about the Holocaust and other genocides in light of recent world events.

While 93 per cent of the teachers in the poll said they included Holocaust and genocide education in their lesson plans — which includes showing videos or films or taking trips to museums — only 51 per cent said their students are knowledgeable on the subject.

They mentioned barriers to teaching the subject, such as a lack of training, massive amounts of material, time constraints and curriculum limitations.

"Teachers have been telling us they are afraid to teach it; they don't know how to teach it," Berger said. She added that a major step in the right direction came in 2021 with the publication of a guide, [Studying Genocides](#), which has been widely distributed in schools.

Financed by Quebec's Education Ministry, [the guide covers nine recognized genocides](#) of the 20th century, including those in Namibia, the Ottoman Empire, Europe during the Second World War and Rwanda. The workbook also examines the [genocide of Indigenous Peoples in Canada](#).

Berger said teaching the guide remains optional, and suggests making it mandatory.

"By mandating education on all these genocides, Quebec would be leading the way in North America on such education," Berger said. "I think this is the way to go."

More specifically, the foundation wants the subject to be taught in a mandatory separate module — maybe even a full course — focusing on the concept and history of genocides. A module means a unit within a larger course. The foundation's proposal would mean four or five classes as opposed to one class in a larger course.

But the approach of including the subject in a larger course remains the Legault government's approach, an aide to [Education Minister Bernard Drainville](#) said in an email to The Gazette.

"We agree it is an important question," the aide said. "The concept of genocide is currently studied in three programs in the domain of social studies in secondary classes."

Students are first exposed to the concept in the early part of their high school education, in the History and Citizenship Education program. It is also addressed in a 20th-century history program and, lastly, in the Contemporary World course.

The foundation argues "this is the problem" with the current system.

"It is mentioned here and there in a few paragraphs to illustrate other concepts, such as tensions and conflicts, justice and civil rights," the foundation said when informed of the government's view.

"Teachers need sufficient time and space in the curriculum to cover the topic of genocide properly."

A mandatory separate module would "ensure that students grasp the definition of genocide, what leads to genocide and how it can be prevented from developing at any stage."

The foundation also proposes an exam question on the topic to ensure the subject is understood, as well as more pedagogical training to "give teachers the confidence to teach this sensitive topic."

Both Drainville's team and the foundation stressed they understand each other's views and want to continue working in partnership.

Berger, however, said the current world atmosphere is making some of the foundation's work difficult.

"We're having some Holocaust presentations being cancelled," she said. "Teachers have been telling us they are afraid to trigger students' emotions. So this is very concerning."

"I think it is very, very important to keep going and keep pushing this."

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