

ECAJ update

I am delighted to be invited to provide a regular update about the ECAJ's work and in particular to tell you more about the education initiatives to combat antisemitism which were mentioned in the last edition of 'Impact', and which the ECAJ is leading with the Board's support in NSW.

The shocking racist bullying of Jewish children at public schools in Victoria last year, which included a serious assault, and similar but less well-publicised incidents in public and private schools in NSW, have demonstrated once again the destructive nexus between racist attitudes and language, and acts of violence.

Clearly, Holocaust education through formal learning, visits to Jewish museums and personal encounters with survivors have been, and will continue to be, of critical importance. Much good work is done by Jewish organisations in teacher training and in educating young minds to understand that the lessons of the Holocaust personally relate to them, and are not merely legacies of the remote past.

Yet incidents of antisemitic bullying in schools have become more, not less, frequent and serious, and have targeted a Jewish child as young as 5 years old.

By the time students study the Holocaust in Year 10, as every State and Territory curriculum requires, their character, opinions and attitudes have largely been formed. Further, the quality of courses varies widely, as each State and Territory allows schools a wide discretion as to what precisely is taught about the Holocaust, and the time and resources devoted to it.

So in addition to Holocaust education we need to do something more, and start much earlier.

From the earliest years of school, and at key moments in a child's development, it is possible to teach students, in ways which are appropriate for each age group, that differences in appearance or background are not things to be feared or reviled, and certainly not an excuse for bullying, abuse or ridicule. Critical thinking and guarding against prejudice are skills which can be taught from an early age in history, nature and social studies, science, literature, art and other religions.

To that end the ECAJ has been working with educators in public and Catholic schools, and consulting with colleagues in the Christian and Muslim communities, to find ways to:

- utilise education as a means of inoculation against prejudice – and against antisemitism in particular - by building some defensive strategies at every stage of a student's learning, and in professional development of teachers and in parental engagement;
- create a culture against prejudice, and against antisemitism in particular, in the school community and counter the considerable influence of social media in promoting prejudice and hatred.

We are delighted that the Board is assisting us with this project in NSW.

Living as we do in times of fear and uncertainty, which have predictably led to the proliferation of outlandish conspiracy theories, including those which are rooted in antisemitism, this work has never been more important. We do not under-estimate the difficulties, but neither are we daunted by them.

Peter Wertheim AM is co-CEO of the ECAJ

[Note: A future edition of Impact will provide an update about the ECAJ's Leadership and Advocacy alumni program which the Board's Jeremy Spinak leadership program and other programs feed into].