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Holocaust education gets a bad rap. But it's not falling short — we are.

Holocaust education can't solve intolerance, but it can lay a foundation of facts, writes a history professor.

[Daniel Greene](#) April 14, 2026



Jeffrey Blutinger leads a workshop for high school educators about teaching the Holocaust, at California State University, Long Beach, August 2012. (Scott Varley/Digital First Media/Torrance Daily Breeze via Getty Images)

This Holocaust Remembrance Day marks nearly 81 years since the end of World War II. Few living witnesses remain, whether Holocaust survivors or military veterans.

As we move further in time from the events of the Holocaust, a troubling contradiction has emerged. On the one hand, American political discourse and social media feeds are saturated with references to Nazism. The Holocaust seems ever-present in American culture. And yet, multiple surveys, including one released in 2025 by the [Claims Conference](#), have found that middle and high school students lack basic knowledge of its history. More troubling, the United States has seen a rise in antisemitism, including terrifying violence against Jews at synagogues from Pittsburgh to West Bloomfield,

Michigan. Streamers talk about admiring Hitler. An artist who releases a single called “Heil Hitler” sells out a Los Angeles arena.

Does this mean Americans have failed to learn the lessons of the Holocaust? And if so, who is to blame?

It might be tempting to conclude that Holocaust education has failed. Many critics have determined that it has. Multiple prominent Jewish voices have [even claimed](#) that Holocaust education could be making antisemitism worse. As these ideas have gained traction, Holocaust educators have been thrown into a panic.

What’s missing from these discussions are clear-eyed assertions about the purpose of Holocaust education, as well as a recognition of its limits. We have little agreement on the questions: What can and what should Holocaust education do?

As critics have challenged the efficacy of Holocaust education, it has become laden with some impossible political and moral burdens. We hear that Holocaust education is a failure unless it prevents authoritarianism, antisemitism and genocide. It also should teach tolerance and empathy, while combating bullying and racism. These are unrealistic expectations, considering the findings that students today don’t even know the facts.

In many ways, Holocaust education in the United States is still shaped by the optimism of the 1990s, when many believed that antisemitism here was in irreversible decline. The assumptions of the 1990s are ill-suited for the realities of 2026. In the face of rising antisemitism, Holocaust education needs a reality check.

Of course students should learn about the dangers of fascism, hatred and mass murder. But expecting that teaching the Holocaust alone will end these scourges is an entirely unrealistic goal.

What are realistic goals? First, we need to teach students that the Holocaust happened. This may sound like an absurdly elementary approach. But there are multiple reasons it is not. Consider again the fact that the war ended more than 80 years ago. Most teenagers today have had no firsthand experience with people who lived through World War II and the Holocaust. The events of 80 or 90 years ago may seem like ancient history to them — and they are getting confusing, often incorrect, messaging from streamers and social media. Starting with the basics of what happened provides an essential foundation upon which to build.

Students today are learning in a climate of increasing assaults on truth, including denial and distortion of the Holocaust. Some students enter classrooms with doubts about whether the Holocaust happened. Holocaust education must first quash these doubts with

facts and evidence and then move on to higher-order thinking. Teaching what happened, layering in how and why it happened, and building understanding of its consequences will prepare students to think critically about the dangers of unchecked antisemitism and the assaults on democratic norms.

In this challenging educational landscape, teachers also need more support. More than half of the states now mandate Holocaust education. But many teachers report that they do not have enough time or guidance about best practices for teaching this history. A [2025 RAND survey](#) found that nearly half of middle school and high school social studies teachers spend less than two hours per year teaching the Holocaust. One third of middle school English teachers who teach the topic also spend less than two hours per year on it. So do close to one half of high school English teachers.

Burdening these teachers with combating contemporary antisemitism and teaching tolerance in two hours or less, while also expecting that their students learn the facts of the Holocaust, is the wrong approach.

Rather than blaming Holocaust educators, we should focus on providing teachers with the resources and information they need to convey the facts of the Holocaust in ways that students will find engaging and meaningful. Telling stories grounded in victims' and survivors' experiences can help students understand the complexity of human behavior and the power of hate to inspire violence and mass murder. But this must stem from the specifics of Holocaust history, rather than vague platitudes. It is woefully naive to expect that teaching the Holocaust will solve all the problems of hate in the world, but we should expect it to raise important and enduring questions that emerge from this history.

This is not to suggest that Holocaust educators should ignore the contemporary relevance of this history. Good history teaching helps students make connections to their times. It does so in ways that prioritize evidence, facts, and truth — aspects of Holocaust history, and other difficult histories as well, that are too much under assault in contemporary political culture. Countering misinformation, disinformation, and lies with facts and evidence will always be an uphill battle. But it is a critically important one. In the end, Holocaust educators' first responsibility is to get this complex history right. It's an enormous responsibility, one that we should not lose sight of as the last witnesses to the Holocaust pass away.

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