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*courtesy of Meredith Teuber*

*The genocide awareness event rallies support from Congress by encouraging young people to sign letters.*

## Genocide education helps students get at roots of evil

by CHRISTA HILLSTROM

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Never again, we tell them.

But when it comes to global genocide, students in Illinois may have a keener understanding than most adults realize about the discrimination and violence that can lead to atrocities.

As attacks in Darfur rage and violence among young people in Chicago escalates this year, some teachers are taking advantage of a 3-year-old law that requires schools to expand Holocaust education to incorporate other genocides, from Bosnia to Rwanda to Sudan.

Kelley Szany, assistant director of education for the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center in Skokie, said it's critical to teach more than the details of any one faraway genocide. She said students must recognize these symptoms as part of a larger whole, something so pervasive it can even hide in middle school hallways--something as insidious as discrimination.

"I think people can be as knowledgeable and educated about the situation as possible," Szany said. "But there needs to be a reawakening in individuals to care about others, whether they are in Africa or Asia or next door."

Illinois State Rep. John Fritchey, the Chicago Democrat who sponsored the bill in 2005, said that implementing a broader genocide curriculum across the state is a big undertaking that should be taken seriously, but it does not have adequate funding yet.

"It's my hope that educating our students about the issue of genocide in its totality will help add to a new society that really achieves 'never again,'" he said.

Lillian Gerstner, site director of the Holocaust museum, said around 200 students across the state submitted essays for a museum contest this spring. The subject was, "History's Dark Echo: The Challenge of Never Again in the 21st Century."

"There was a sense in the top essays that the challenge of making 'never again' a reality was indeed in the hands of their generation," she said. "What we have to do as educators is get students to realize that it doesn't matter that it's not happening to them. It's still important."

In Mundelein's Carl Sandburg Middle School, Meredith Teuber's 8th graders know just how important it is. They've taken the lessons of their genocide education unit so much to heart that they decided to teach others what they learned.

The students held a genocide awareness event last month that drew more than 100 classmates and community members. They

researched genocides around the world, putting together presentations to show attendees how the discrimination at genocide's core causes what should be "never again" to happen again and again.

"Before we were doing this, we were learning about just how devastating the Holocaust was," said student Samantha Norton. "And then we started to read more about stuff like Darfur, and we thought other people should care, too."

The 8th graders helped younger students and community members sign letters to Congress encouraging a more active response to human rights abuses in Darfur. They said they hope the lessons will make as big an impression on others as it did on them.

"I'm just hoping that since we informed so many people, that then they'll go on and tell their family and friends," said Alex Roeske. "And hopefully it will just go on and on like that."

Teuber said she made a point to give her class a meaningful understanding of genocide that delves deeper than just throwing statistics and anecdotes about the Holocaust at them: She wants them to connect it to their own lives.

"I always try to bring it down to the small acts of kindness," she said. "If someone's books drop on the floor at school, do you just walk by, or help them pick them up? Part of the point is to get them to take care and step outside themselves."

And the connection is starting to dawn on her students, she said.

"We learned about the stages of genocide," said student Bianca Sanchez. "The first one is classification. By learning about that I realized that I myself haven't been classifying people as much, I just see them as more equal now."

Sanchez added that her students in her school frequently divide themselves between two groups —"Mexicans and Americans"— and that fights break out between them.

"They see violence all the time, so you have to find a way to make learning about genocide personal," Teuber said. "I think some kids can connect it back to the violence in their own schools."

Szany said she hopes the that the state will eventually fund curriculum development and offer teachers more guidance about how to help students understand the many dimensions of genocide and its causes.

"I don't know whether it's in human nature to completely eliminate prejudice, which is at the source," said Gerstner. "But I do know that we can learn to better respond to it."

Sanchez, who vowed to teach her own children about genocide someday, shared her favorite part of the event:

"There was a little 6th-grade girl who came up to me, and I was teaching her about the eight stages of genocide. When I was getting to the extermination part, she said she thought it was so awful, and she signed some letters. She said she wished she was doing something to help it. I told her that she was doing something."



*courtesy of Meredith Teuber*

*Meredith Teuber's 8th grade class say they intend to make increasing awareness of genocide a part of their futures*



## Related Links

[Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center Find out more about the stages of genocide](#)

### Mom, what does "extermination" mean?

Teaching your kids about sex is one thing. But for many parents, sitting down to help them understand evil can be quite another undertaking.

Whether you decide to tackle genocide with your children or not, students are being increasingly exposed to its horrors in school.

"It was just really hard to look at the pictures that we found on the Internet," 8th grader Colin Joy said about beginning a research project on genocide. "It was really horrific, seeing people like skeletons. And people with so many diseases that aren't getting treated."

While the more graphic images of genocide are not for students of all ages, you can start to talk with your children about the seeds that sometimes grow into genocide at any age, said Kelley Szany of the Holocaust museum.

"We always say that the Holocaust begins with people—intolerance, indifference, bigotry and lack of respect for others," she said.

Children deal with these things all the time, she added, and parents might be able to help them process it by becoming involved in the conversation.

"I think one of the hardest parts was just accepting it, and knowing that it was actually happening," said Michael Thompson after his 8th-grade class' genocide unit. "It was hard to see people with cuts and stuff who were dying because no one cared."

Bianca Sanchez, another 8th grader, said it was helpful that her parents talked to her about what she was learning about the Holocaust. She said it was good to watch "Schindler's List" with her mother after learning about Nazi atrocities in school.

Lori Walsh, mom of 14-year-old Brandon, said she was surprised to receive a letter from her son's teacher, Meredith Teuber.

Teuber had asked her students to read "Night," Elie Wiesel's personal memoir of concentration camp life. She noticed the book's profound impact on Brandon.

"He used to sit around like he didn't really care," she said. "His personality in the class, since we started that, has completely flip-flopped."

"At first I didn't think I cared about the subject, and that it would be dumb" Brandon said. "After reading all of it, everything changed."

He said the scene that remained in his mind more than any other was when Wiesel was forced to run 42 miles in the snow.

"If they fell behind, they got shot," he said. "I was shocked. I know that I can run eight miles and be amazingly tired, so having to run 40 miles without a choice, without shoes on, not being able to slow down ..."

Teuber described Brandon as "the nicest kid" and was moved to read a letter in response to the book, in which he expressed regret for having ever said negative things about Jewish people.

Until reading a copy of it, Walsh hadn't realized how deeply the book had affected her son.

"I wish I could have read the book while he was reading it, so that we could read it together," she said. "He's never really shared anything that in-depth about anything that he's read at school, because I don't think he's ever read anything that has impacted him on such a level."

Walsh suggested that parents and teachers coordinate a way for parents to participate in reading what their students read, when it comes to intense topics like genocide that could confuse, disturb and transform their kids.

Brandon said he had picked Uganda as a research topic for a school project related to genocide education.

"There's just a lot of hate in the world," he said of what he's learned so far. "I don't think I really cared about anything that much before, and I didn't think about other people as much as I do now."