

My name is Amanda Garces and I am a member of the Vermont Coalition for Ethnic and Social Equity in Schools. I am also a mother of two multiracial children ages 2 and 4 who will soon be entering the public school system. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today regarding House Bill H. 794.

In July, 2017 when I was reading the news, I saw how Oregon was able to pass their ethnic studies bill. Having moved from Arizona where an Ethnic Studies ban sought to erase the identity of my community, I immediately felt hope and began to bring together the people who are already in the community doing the work, working for social and racial justice, and already moving forward initiatives that connect this work in bringing our stories and histories to the classrooms.

In December 2017, a Federal Judge in Arizona found that the Ethnic Studies Ban was motivated by racism and discriminatory intent. It was the same month that our coalition solidified with a strong steering committee connected across Vermont, members who range in age, race, ethnicity, professions, abilities, and gender.

We support having Ethnic and social equity standards in Vermont schools because of the many benefits they can provide including:

- reducing bias, harassment, disproportionate patterns of discipline of students from non-dominant social groups by both other students *and* school staff.
- improving self esteem and academic performance of kids from non-dominant groups
- providing a fuller and more accurate representation of history for all students
- Use the education system as a tool to challenge and dismantle structural racism and other forms of social bias....

Our campaign partners include ALCU of VT, Black Lives Matter of greater Burlington, CCALEO, Justice for All, I am Vermont Too, LGBTQIA Alliance of Vermont, Thaddeus Steven School, Migrant Justice, Milton Inclusion & Diversity Initiative, Rights and Democracy, the Peace and Justice Center, The Root Social Justice Center, the Vermont Statewide Independent Living Council, Vermont Interfaith Action, Voices for Vermont's Children and the list is growing.

This coalition was the vehicle “many had been waiting for”[i] to consolidate the efforts already underway across sectors and to bring to our children what they need to feel represented and to nurture entire communities. We would like to emphasize that our coalition is strong, rooted in communities, and ready to do the heavy lifting.

As a coalition, we would like to offer the following friendly amendments:

1) Page 2, Line 8, Definitions Sections 1:

Ethnic Studies means the instruction of students in kindergarten through grade 12 in the historical contributions and perspectives of ethnic groups and social groups.

Our coalition would like to include **the instruction of students to include pre-kindergarten**. Multiple studies suggest that the need to begin anti-bias instruction at an early age is crucial. Ellen Wolpert for the Committee for Boston Public Housing wrote a book called Start Seeing

Diversity: The Basic Guide to an Anti-bias classroom. The book highlights that “even very young children notice differences and begin to discriminate based on them” and that there is a need to challenge and explore the issues that divides our communities. Issues such as “age, gender, sexual orientation, family composition, economic class, physical abilities and characteristics, race, and ethnicity and many more”

Multiple studies support Wolpert’s assertions and suggests the importance of books that can offer self-reflection as a tool to an anti-bias classroom. In other words, ethnic and social equity. Our coalition requests that standards are also included for all pre-K programs and would be more than happy to provide a review of the research at a later time.

2) Page 4, Line 3, Section 1: c 2 and 2 A:

The coalition suggests to delete the “A minimum of 80 percent of the” in line 3 page 4 to address the increase in board members, with so many being appointed positions (Sec of AOE, Exec of NEA, Assistant AG who works w/Ed, Exec Director of SBA, rep of the VPA) the percentage will not help us achieve our goal of having an equitable representation from the ethnic and social groups.

The coalition would like to make the friendly amendment to remove the word minority from the sentence in Line 5 (A). Language has evolved and the word minority has been largely replaced by groups identifying with their communities whether is people of color or part of a social group as defined in section 1.a.

For some, minority is a pejorative term. It means the groups being represented have no political power, no access to resources, no equal treatment, because, well, they are minorities. We would like to be represented and identify as forces who are making Vermont a better place and who identify with their respective groups.

The paragraph shall read

(2) Members on the Board identified under subdivisions (1)-(8) of subsection (b) of this section shall

A. Be people from ethnic and social groups who have a background in advocacy for the group they represent.

Line -- page - we would like to change the descriptions to:

- (A) Gender Identification
- (B) Disabilities
- (C) Socioeconomic Status
- (D) Primary Language
- (E) Race and ethnicity
- (F) Sexual Orientation

We also would like to speak to the changes proposed by the Vermont School Board Association (VSBA). First, we would like to applaud the efforts by the VSBA for their commitment to equity in

schools. We know that the VSBA is a strong resource in all of our communities in Vermont. We included them in this bill because of their independent nature, their knowledge and contributions to the schools system.

In response to their amendments on page 3. Line 17- in section (c) appointment and operation: Where The VSBA suggests to have the secretary of education appoint the members in consultation with our coalition, we would like to suggest to kept the original language and clarify our thought process behind this.

The Vermont Coalition for Ethnic and Social Equity in Schools is committed to make this bill a reality. Our members and campaign partners are committed to ensure that we have a transparent process. We have seen first-hand that the system in which appointments are made only by one individual does not work. We are committed to have a community process where we will have open community discussions across sectors, communities, and geographical areas where we can find the best person to represent the ethnic and social groups described here. We know that the most vocal advocate does not necessarily represent entire groups and we want to make sure we find the right person to advocate for our children's future.

We had chosen the Vermont School Boards Association because they represent the school boards and are independent from the secretary of education.

We would also like to keep the opportunity to suggest the members filling the vacancy in line 20 through 2 of page 4.

3) Page 4, Line 9: The VESE coalition would like to retain the original language to have the coalition to convene the first meeting of the board to occur on or before January 1, 2019.

As people in the community already doing this work, would like the opportunity to serve to make this a reality. Vermont is no stranger to volunteer initiatives and this gives us the opportunity to work together with the group to help move this work forward.

4) Page 5, Line 5: We would like to request that minimum standards for schools remain as part of the model policy.

5) Page 6, Line 3: VSBA suggested to exchange the word "ensures" with the word "provides." However, the coalition would like to keep with the word "ensures."

6) Page 6, Line 10: We agree with VSBA's suggested changes as they allow more than just the parents access to raising and voicing concerns.

7) Page 6, Line 12: The coalition agrees that all staff including teachers should be provided with training in addressing racial incidents.

8) Page 8, Line 4: The coalition would like the bill to reflect the original report date of December 15th, 2021.

[i] Sha'an I am VT too.
