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STATE OF VERMONT

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

State Representative Kiah Morris
H. 794
Ethnic and Social Equity in Vermont Schools
February 8, 2018
House Education Committee

Good Morning Committee:

I want to begin by thanking you for attending the recent Black Lives Matter flag raising at Montpelier high school. For me, it was a beautiful and powerful affirmation and honoring of not just black students at the school but all students of color in our state that their lives and experiences are vital and precious. Thank you for standing in solidarity with the youth and our communities.

Thank you for offering an opportunity to present this bill to the committee. This bill comes to us today at the request and as a result of comprehensive work conducted by the Vermont Coalition for Ethnic and Social Equity in schools. The coalition is led by a multicultural and multigenerational group including people of color from various racial and ethnic groups, and people of varying gender identities, economic backgrounds and geographical regions of Vermont. The coalition includes elders, students, parents, educators, and organizations.

This effort seeks to create a unique opportunity for our state to not just embrace the concepts of diversity, equity and inclusion but to take tangible action to implement a meaningful cultural change and normalization of antibias and antiracist understandings in our youth at the age that it is most needed.

This bill seeks to establish an advisory board to identify standards that fail to recognize the history, contributions, and perspectives of ethnic and socially marginalized groups. It considers recommendations around improvements in school culture around these issues, restorative practices for disciplinary responses, and more.

In his book, *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence*, scholar Dr. Derald Wing Sue discusses his research which suggests,

“..that the inability of teachers , trainers , and parents to facilitate a successful dialogue on race has major consequences for persons of color because being unheard and silenced (a) assails their mental health , (b) creates a hostile and invalidating campus , work , or societal climate , (c) perpetuates stereotype threat , (d) creates physical health problems , (e) saturates the broader society with cues that signal devaluation of social group identities , and (f) lowers classroom and work productivity and problem solving abilities. A failure of successful race talk has negative effects on White Americans as well. The inability or reluctance to dialogue openly and honestly with people of color on topics of race and racism leads to a lack of checks and balances to their worldviews. It (a) lowers empathic ability , (b) dims perceptual awareness and accuracy , (c) lessens compassion for others , (d) leads to self - denigration and a sense of failure , and (e) allows many to live in a world of false deception about the nature and operation of racism and their complicity in the perpetuation of silence.”

He also shares a story from an educator:

“It happens in every class. We're discussing a text, a publication, a current event, a poem. The content doesn't matter. It's the phrase that counts. A student comments and uses the phrase “African American” or even “black people.” The reaction of the class—almost all white—is swift. As if choreographed, all eyes turn to the one student of color. The spotlight of eyes shines down and he or

she blinks back as if staring into the sun. The teacher should use this moment to open a discussion. But let's talk first about what some teachers do: Nothing. In many cases, for many reasons, we miss this teachable moment by ignoring it.”¹

Consider the experience of the students in the class, of the student of color and that of the educator. I hear from administrators and educators that they want to do something, they want to do better, but they do not know where to begin.

Consider recent incidents in Milton, Burlington and more and how this bill can help mitigate and correct these issues. This bill creates a pathway to creating a comprehensive response that will transform that classroom experience to one that enriches our whole state.

- California has a requirement for high school students and established Ethnic Studies Standards²
- Oregon is the first state to require standards for K-12 and is currently in the rulemaking and implementation stages of their work. ³

Ethnic/social equity standards could:

- reduce bias, harassment, disproportionate patterns of discipline of students from non-dominant social groups by both other students *and* school staff.
- improves self-esteem and academic performance of kids from non-dominant groups

¹ Sue, Derald Wing. *Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race* (p. 283, 210). Wiley. Kindle Edition.

² <https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-12-06/california-will-soon-provide-ethnic-studies-classes-all-high-schoolers-heres-why> Accessed: 2/7/18

³ <https://olis.leg.state.or.us/liz/2017R1/Downloads/MeasureDocument/HB2845>
<http://portlandobserver.com/news/2017/jun/27/ethnic-studies-bill-passes/> Accessed: 2/7/18

- gives a fuller and more accurate representation of history for all students
- helps dismantle structural racism through the education system....

It is our goal to provide a consensus bill and initial conversations with stakeholder groups have been positive with minor amendments. It has been shared that similar proposals have been brought to this committee in the past for a number of years but were not able to gain traction. I believe this is the time, our children cannot no longer wait until we are all “ready,” to do the work that has been sorely needed.

As you consider this bill, I do offer the recommendation to add two additional members to the board, a representative from the Vermont Superintendents’ Association and someone from early childhood education to ensure that public pre-k is included.

Thank you!