

Vermont State Board of Education

Faculty member of Education at the University of Vermont

Current Role: Associate Dean of Academic & Faculty Affairs for the College of Education & Social Services

And today I speak as a Vermont-based higher education member for the Act 1 Working Group. I understood that today's meeting would be an opportunity to speak to critique of some of the language in the revised version of the Educational Quality Standards, a document the group has been working on for the last year-and-a-half.

Normally, I do not speak out publicly because there are others who can speak out more powerfully and on point but in this one instance I felt it was important to share my perspective because this group's work has great potential for strengthening relationships between families, schools, and communities and could provide a model for other states to demonstrate inclusivity in teaching by using a broad ethnic studies framework to reflect the histories, languages, cultures, and experiences of all children who attend a federally funded public school. At the very least, schools must represent and care for all children, and yet history has shown post *Brown v. Board of Education* - a landmark case ruling that racial segregation was unconstitutional - that an equitable, anti-racist, culturally responsive, anti-discriminatory and inclusive education is woefully elusive for many public schools across the nation and continues to be so. As someone who has worked in education for over 35 years, I have worked in a public school classroom with many different children with many different needs and strengths, and, more recently in my work at UVM, I have worked on strengthening partnerships between families, schools, and communities, which is why I believe the work of Act 1 is crucial to bringing these elements together with children at the center of our attention.

There is one issue that I was made aware of as a member of this group throughout this process that would like a better understanding of why the Act 1 Working group settled on the use of the adjective "critical" and adverb "critically" which we used to support some of the definitions in our draft.

First of all, we discussed the fluidity of language and the different ways that terminology evokes difference, and we aspired to language that would engage schools, teachers, administrators, and communities not to divide, to use this language as a steppingstone for talking about curriculum and whether/how curriculum reflects the everyday lives and histories of the children and families who attend the school district.

Our decision to use the adverb "critically" was related more to the ideas of the Brazilian philosopher and educator Paolo Freire who argued that pedagogy should not be seen as pouring information into a student's head without teaching them how to critically think and use this information as citizens who live in a democratic society. Many have been aware of a movement across the nation that is banning Critical Race Theory, which is a theoretical framework that originated in the field of legal studies to better understand from a sociological

perspective the impact of race on certain institutions in our society related to health, housing, banking, and schools. This framework is often wrongly conflated with the aims of an ethnic studies framework, which is meant to include not exclude the histories and experiences of all children. This is done through curriculum and teaching for the monumental purpose of helping all children regardless of where they come from, so they can gain a sense of belonging from prekindergarten to grade 12 and beyond. The social and emotional well-being of all children cannot be overstated especially during a time when the field of education is truly suffering because of the consequences of the pandemic and the continuing disparity in wealth and opportunity, which erodes the opportunity for high quality learning for the most vulnerable children and youth. We know who they are.

Finally, I want to emphasize the inclusive way that the co-chairs Amanda and Mark have facilitated the Act 1 Working group for the last two years. In all the meetings I have attended – I have only missed 1 – the public is welcomed to address their concerns. I have learned so much from the other members and I feel great pride of working in a group with so many diverse perspectives. It has been especially humbling to work with our youth members who have inspired the group with their endless capacity for hope. In all the conversations I have had with families and youth I am heartened by their hope in an inclusive educational system. I am also humbled by classroom teachers who have been teaching inclusively for years, sometimes to the detriment of their own needs and mental health, as they are challenged relentlessly by people who have political agendas that do not belong in the classroom. My hope is that the Board understand that this revised language is meant to guide and for schools and teachers to take the next step and to integrate curriculum that reflects the needs, interests, resources of the families and children that they serve.

