

Thursday, February 13, 2020

Dear Members of the House Committee on Education,

We all see only that which we are trained to see. - Robert Anton Wilson

As a fellow member of our Supervisory Union Board said to me, we grant our schools monopoly over our children's childhood; as parents, we should be able to expect our teachers, staff, and administrators, therefore, to honor each student's differences, unhindered by unrecognized baggage. We should also be able to expect the same of each other as adults and as professionals.

Let me give you a few simple perspectives on the current atmosphere in the area where our small Supervisory Union is located.

1. The October, 2016 Vermont School Board Association annual meeting was thematically centered around implicit bias. Two speakers from the Kirwan Institute, Robin Wright and Lena Tenney, put forth discussion points centered around the fact that skewed perceptions can derail attempts at equity and inclusion, that biases affect expectations of achievement, and that aligning outcomes requires honest assessments and structural approaches, including layered teaching that includes busdrivers, custodians, etc.
2. Un-ironically, a group of students presented on the last day of the VSBA meeting a panel forum regarding their achievements in LGBTQ activism. Most of the students were from Montpelier and Barre, though they had created a statewide support network for other LGBTQ students. When asked by the gathered group what they needed from the school board/s to further enable their work, the wording of their answers betrayed the fact that even their school advisor was unaware of his own biases towards the students he was advising.
3. A 2017 headline from the New York Times stated, "New Hampshire Investigates Wounding of 8-Year-Old as Possible Hate Crime" (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/13/us/biracial-boy-lynched-new-hampshire.html>). Just as the school year was getting underway, an 8-year-old biracial boy was nearly lynched by an older group of white boys. He was told to put a noose around his neck, and then he was pushed off a picnic table, into the tightening noose. He survived, physically and emotionally scarred. The event took place in Claremont, NH, across the Connecticut River from our Supervisory Union, and in very close proximity to one of our SU's towns. The incident made national news. Was it addressed in our schools? No. It was written off as "boys will be boys" and nothing pertaining to race. Regardless, it was an opportunity to start a healthy conversation about why area communities reacted in the way/s they did (or did not). At the Windsor Southeast Supervisory Union Board meeting, I requested that fellow members simply go back to their home districts and ask what type of implicit bias training was given to teachers, staff, and students. Of our four

(at the time) districts, two reported back that they did not think such an inventory was necessary, because their towns' residents are not racist. Of the other two towns, it was reported that there was no training at any level, and that it was desperately needed. In my own district of West Windsor, our principal and her teachers reported that they were feeling lost as far as tools they lacked in areas of biases regarding race, gender, sexuality, ability. They don't have the tools. And that's where it is. At our SU, teachers have now undergone a one-hour implicit bias session. That does not include special educators, some of whom are overtly biased towards the very students whom they assist.

4. A parent in our SU is extremely frustrated because as often the sole POC in his classes, her son has had to bear the burden of teaching his adult teachers, and young classmates, how to treat him and other POCs, since he began learning from our schools. The young scholar could often be described as despondent as a result, and hears his mother's expression/s of frustration. How is our system supporting this family? It isn't, in any way, and it's because everyone else, the bus driver, the school janitor, school administrative staff, are not included in the small amount of implicit bias training that is given. So any work done by the school with regards to teacher training, is undone by inconsistency across the system.
5. Olivia LaPierre in 2017, left her post as chair of the Hartford Racial Inequality Committee, after calling out other committee members on biases in their approach to the committee itself, and suggesting that the committee members undergo implicit bias training to find common language. She was accused of reverse racism, and resigned, explaining that there is no reverse racism.
<https://www.vnews.com/Hartford-Racial-Inequality-Committee-13741807>
6. Recently, at one of the schools in our Supervisory Union, a sixth-grade teacher started a fresh unit on implicit biases of various sorts, generally describing what the term means. For his class of 10-15 eleven-year-old scholars, it may have been the first time they were in the safe space they themselves created, able to talk about some of these biases. They asked lots of questions. They expressed lots of new feelings. They went home and told their parents about their self-discovery. Parents in the class became enraged that such matters were being discussed, at all. They claimed the teacher had called the students racist. Many of the parents banded together and complained to administrators about the curriculum. Had the teacher or administrators had adequate training on what language to use in these scenarios, they may have been able to quell the anger; after all, implicit bias training is not about carrying blame, it is about understanding one's own context and predispositions. It is understanding the difference between bias and bigotry.

These examples show obstacles at every level regarding the basic exploration of implicit bias in our schools. It is increasingly apparent that Vermonters are not even aware of what implicit biases are, let alone that they, themselves, are not expected to take blame for carrying them; sometimes, as Jose Saramago said, "You have to leave the island, in order to see the island." (Incidentally, Vermonters are far from the only people who don't understand implicit bias.)

And this is also exactly why it has become apparent that implicit bias training must be mandated for each person who comes into contact with a student during the course of time spent in an educational environment, from the school bus on the way to school, through every minute of the day. Because of the fact of misunderstanding the meaning of the phrase “implicit bias” as being equated with “bigotry”, the pushback regarding even finding common language is very strong. It must be mandated, or it will not ever happen in our state.

The goal of this bill is manifold:

1. Provides a clearer playing field between teachers and students, a common language and point from which conversation may begin about how to solve larger problems.
2. Provides teachers and other staff with language and tools readily usable when faced with actions revealing subtle or outright bigotry.
3. Students internalize their treatment by others; therefore, unbiased and introspective treatment of students by teachers and staff may extend through students to others in family and community.

Again, the bill does not even touch solving bigotry problems, but it does provide a starting point from which we can work together with purpose.

Finally, I would like to add that funding for programs like the one proposed in this bill has been suggested by Eleanor Holmes Norton, a DC representative, in October 2019.

<https://norton.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/norton-introduces-bill-to-address-implicit-bias-in-schools>. Norton’s bill provides funding for implicit bias training in education, as well as the means to evaluate the program’s efficacy. As it worms its way through the House, once passed, if the Vermont bill was in place, it could go straight into effect. Besides it, however, other (uncommitted) sources of funding have been identified.

Thank you for reading this testimony. It means a lot to me that you did.

Sincerely,
Elizabeth Burrows
Mount Ascutney School Board