

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today on H.3. My name is Amanda Garces and I am the founder of the Vermont Coalition for Ethnic and Social Equity in Schools.

The coalition came together in November 2017 to draft and advance what is now called H.3 and modeled after a similar bill passed in Oregon in July 2017. Our coalition is led statewide by multicultural and multigenerational group including: people of color from various racial, ethnic and indigenous groups; females; and anti-poverty, disability rights and LGBTIQA advocates. Our coalition includes, elders, students, parents, educators, and organizations. (A list of some of the organizations are in the document attached to this testimony.)

H.3 begins with findings that highlight historical reports about racism in our schools. Today, I would like to highlight a report and a survey that are important. In January 2015, VT Legal Aid released the report called “Kicked out! Unfair and Unequal Student Discipline in Vermont’s Public Schools.” The report exposes the fact that Vermont students with disabilities and students of color were two to three times more likely to be excluded from school through suspension and expulsion.

In the 2017 the Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey was done and the results revealed that students of color and LGBTIQA youth consistently reveal poorer outcomes in the domains of personal safety, mental health, substance use, and connectivity to their schools and community. It is important to note that this survey is not compulsory for schools in Vermont and is voluntary for students to participate. The current survey report data reflects clear disparities between youth of color and white, non-latino students and is a clear indicator of the need for systemic reform in educational experiences.

H.3 begins with the basics, the educational standards are the floor not the ceiling. They are the framework used to create curriculum and instruction, a framework that should contain the tools to help educators represent our histories and contributions.

I attended three New Jersey High schools, two with demographics similar to Vermont, and I did not read a single book that reflected my existence, a reality for our kids in most Vermont schools. I hear a lot of “Vermont is so white”, a statement that masks the inaction to tackle the representation issue. Reading Gloria Anzaldua’s books, reading about the chicano movement, the United Farm Workers among others made me who I am today. I am self-confident, a proud immigrant, proud of my roots, my family, my ancestors and I see my history not as one of victimhood but one of resistance. I would like for us to give that gift to our children who need to see themselves represented, even if it's just one of us in your school it matters. It matters because learning about Gloria Anzaldua does not only benefit one child, it benefits all children. All students will be able to explore safely questions of identify, race, equality, and racism.

This bill is the beginning of a long road for Vermont. My children are multi-ethnic and multi-racial and I hope that they grow up in an environment that talks about their identity as something to be celebrated and not questioned or hidden. We know that oppression manifests differently for members of indigenous and LGBTIQ communities, racial and ethnic groups, females, and students with disabilities. Our approach to bring all groups together is embedded in the belief that our liberation is connected and that we must celebrate all of our intersectionalities.

The comparison bill that you see today is the result of hard work from last session. Our bill got introduced late and Representative Sharp, who chaired this committee, wanted a bill that was agreed upon with the Agency of Education and other stakeholders. For months, we negotiated with the Agency of Education and the School Board Association until we finally reached consensus. By then, we had missed crossover and we had to put this bill into the Miscellaneous Education bill. The language went straight to a conference committee, which was just two people from the Senate Education Committee and two people from this committee. We were never able to talk about the importance of reviewing statutes related to school policies to the Senate Education Committee or the senators in the conference committee for that matter. The review of the statutes and further reporting to the General Assembly should be kept in the bill.

The original bill had a model policy that took into account tools for schools to ensure they are a welcoming environment for all of our kids. It is that language that complements the standard review and gives a different lens and scrutiny to the task. The review and recommendation of policies such as the hazing and harassment is key.

On December 24, me and my colleagues signed a letter regarding the *Dear Colleague Letter on Nondiscriminatory Administration of School Discipline*, the *Overview of the Supportive School Discipline Initiative* and supporting documents withdrawn by Acting US Attorney General. “Collectively these documents have served as the backbone of a framework implemented to address the administration of nondiscriminatory discipline in schools and stop the school to prison pipeline. These statements of policy and guidance were implemented by the previous administration because of the absence of any other suitable tool as a result of an obstructionist congress, unwilling to pass the appropriate laws.”

This guidance was created by the Obama administration because there were no tools to deal with discrimination in school discipline. The working group will be able to see that such tools do not exist.

Yesterday, I heard from the Representative who questioned the omission of the Executive Director of Racial Equity. We agreed that they should be included. It was not because the position had not yet been approved. We suggest to add this person to our working group and

caution against the thought of having this person alone reviewing the statutes. We must remember that the Director of Racial Equity needs to look at housing, education, employment, health services access, the criminal justice system, and economic development. We will be setting up that position for failure if we think they can do it alone.

One of the most powerful attributes of this bill is its inclusion of representatives from each of the ethnic and social groups. By including the already marginalized communities to this process, it will be easier to find where the bias lies and to ensure a review that takes into account the people being spoken about. The process will be enriched by the coalition of individuals representing the different arms of education.

To close, we support having ethnic and social equity standards in Vermont schools because of the many benefits they can provide including:

- Reducing bias, harassment, and disproportionate patterns of discipline for students from non-dominant social groups by both other students and school staff
- Improving self esteem and academic performance of students from non-dominant groups
- Providing a fuller and more accurate representation of history for all students
- Using the education system as a tool to challenge and dismantle structural racism and other forms of social bias