

Sarika Tandon Testimony for H.3
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Testimony in Support of H.3

My name is Sarika Tandon, and I have lived in Vermont for 15 years. I work as an equity consultant in the nonprofit sector, and am an Adjunct Faculty member at Antioch University New England, where I teach about issues of diversity, justice, and inclusion. I am a community racial justice advocate and I serve on the Advisory Board of the Vermont Coalition for Ethnic and Social Equity in Schools, and volunteer at the Montpelier Community Justice Center. I am also a Co-Advisor to the Racial Justice Alliance at Montpelier High School. And if all that doesn't paint a clear picture, let's just say that racial justice is really important to me. This is because of my experiences growing up in a community in western New York with similar racial demographics to the Vermont community I now live in as a woman of color of Indian descent. I am also the mother of two beautiful biracial children, born in Vermont which is the only home they have ever known. I am motivated by this- I don't want them, or anyone else to go through what I went through, let alone the many terrible acts of hate and bias that occur daily to people from socially marginalized identities.

In my personal experience, it wasn't until I started school that I felt like my brownness and immigrant background made me less than a whole person, that my ethnic identity was a liability. What I was sensing in my early childhood that there is a racial hierarchy in our society and that I was not in the dominant group. My people were rarely represented in the curriculum, the media, or popular culture, and if we were represented it was often in stereotypes, caricatures, or diminishing narratives. It has taken me years and years, well into my adult life to understand the layers of my alienation and rejection as a student in my school district. It takes my breath away, that 25 years later, the high school students I work with are expressing a sense of invisibility, marginalization, pain and erasure by the lack of representation that they experience in the curriculum in their schools that was developed to meet Vermont's educational standards. I am concerned about my children growing up in Vermont and not having a clear sense of the beauty and brilliance of their ancestors, of the many cultures that make this world a vibrant and magnificent place. I, like many parents I know who have the resources to do so, have built a personal library of children's

stories, images, and cultural touchstones so that my children can experience people of color as the norm, at least in the comfort of our home.

I am here today, to express my support for the H.3 the Ethnic and Social Equity in Schools bill and I would like to tell you why. As well all know, despite all of the efforts of so many activists, advocates, and proactive educators and leaders, the data shows that there are racial disparities in Vermont's criminal justice, health care, and education systems and these disparities have many roots.

What strikes me about H.3 is its potential to find and suggest changes in our educational standards that can deal with these closer to their roots. Biases and prejudices are learned behaviors, and social science research proves that we start learning these things at a very young age, before we even go to school.

Bear with me for a moment, while I put my faculty hat on here, and talk about the four levels of racism.

Internalized racism includes negative beliefs about racial groups that exists within an individual's mind. This can include feelings of inferiority by a person of color, or feelings of racial superiority by a white person.

Interpersonal racism includes racist actions or beliefs expressed between individuals- this includes racial insults, slurs, and other verbal or physical attacks.

Institutional racism includes unfair policies and discriminatory practices of particular institutions that produce racially inequitable outcomes for people of color.

Structural racism describes racial bias among institutions and across society including the compounding effects of history, culture, ideology and the interactions of institutions and policies that disadvantage people of color.

What is exciting to me about H. 3 is that if passed, and if the gap in existing standards is addressed, we could be doing something tangible to address bias, racism, homophobia, sexism, and ableism, at all four levels- internalized, interpersonal, institutional, and structural. Exposure and inclusion of the histories and contributions of people of color, indigenous people, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, people with disabilities, and women will benefit everyone and hurt no one. Exposure is proven to reduce negative biases. Addressing the gaps in our standards can help our schools do better in telling stories that represent the beauty and brilliance of all communities, stories that are sorely lacking in most schools today. What we are asking for is simply that what we tell the students the truth, not a whitewashed history that paints white/straight/male people as heroes and saviors and everyone else as backwards victims.

We can follow in the footsteps of Oregon and Indiana by actively redressing some of the gaps in our standards, and making schools and communities that feel inclusive, and honest about our culture and history.

I'd like to share a quote from Dominican-American author Junot Diaz, who is a Pulitzer prize winner and MacArthur Genius Fellow.

"You guys know about vampires? ... You know, vampires have no reflections in a mirror? There's this idea that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. And what I've always thought isn't that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. It's that if you want to make a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves. And growing up, I felt like a monster in some ways. I didn't see myself reflected at all. I was like, "Yo, is something wrong with me? That the whole society seems to think that people like me don't exist?" And part of what inspired me, was this deep desire that before I died, I would make a couple of mirrors. That I would make some mirrors so that kids like me might see themselves reflected back and might not feel so monstrous for it."

— Junot Díaz

This is what motivates those of us who brought this bill forward. There are so many things I love about Vermont-the community mindedness, the shared value and respect for nature, the beautiful land, and the down to earth nature of the people both who are from here and who have chosen to make their lives here. And still, even though all of this resonates with me, I regularly question if I want to settle here permanently because of how it feels to be a brown person living and raising a family here.

Last year, when I went to Montpelier High School to watch the students of the Racial Justice Alliance raise the Black Lives Matter flag, I cried. Tears of hope and healing, but also grief that we would even have to raise such a flag, that somewhere a long time ago and still today, there is a message being broadcast that some lives matter more than others. After the ceremony, I remember turning to my friend, Amanda Garces, the founder of the Vermont Coalition for Ethnic and Social Equity in schools. It was just a few months after we wrote what was H.794, the basis of the bill H.3 that you consider today and, the feeling we had that day after watching the flag go up was 'maybe there is a place for us here after all...'

Passing this bill would be an affirmation to many Vermonters- including people of color, indigenous people, members of the LGBTQIA and disability communities, and other people who care about having educational standards that represent the stories

of diverse communities, that Vermont is trying to honor and acknowledge our voices in the education system. It would be an affirmation to me, my family, the students I work with, and all Vermonters- regardless of their background and identity. It would be an affirmation and step forward also to realizing Dr. King's vision of the Beloved Community. This is no small thing. Thank you for listening.