

2/6/19

My name is Bruce Pandya. I'm a Sophomore at U32, and a member of the Vermont Coalition for Ethnic and Social Equity In Schools.

I would first like to take the opportunity to thank you for allowing me to testify today.

I will be speaking in favor of H.3, "An act relating to ethnic and social equity studies standards for public schools"

In 2003, the Vermont Advisory Committee to the U.S Commission on Civil Rights released a follow up to a 1999 report entitled "Racial Harassment in Vermont Public Schools".

Page 16 of this follow up states, "Racial harassment continues to be a serious problem in Vermont schools, according to available data and testimony of school officials, community representatives, parents, and students"¹

Now I sit here before you, over 15 years later, to speak on the fact that Vermont's schools still have a serious problem with racial bias and racial harassment.

But first, I'll speak a little bit about my own experience with racial harassment. I believe it will give you insight as to why I am in strong support of this bill.

I am the proud son of an Indian immigrant. As a very young boy my family and I faced racial harassment by our neighbors, including use of racial epithets.

I recall vividly an incident wherein one of these neighbors sprayed me with a hose for walking past his yard. I was younger than five years old at the time of the incident.

I have suffered racial bias, been subjected to it from the time I was very young. I abhor any form of racial bias, profiling, or harassment. And I believe that there are extremely dire problems in Vermont's public schools which must be addressed.

A curriculum which focuses largely on the dominant groups in society, downplaying or reducing to a footnote the history of marginalized people, is a curriculum which in my view is guaranteed to foster hateful attitudes.

In other words - a curriculum which fosters ignorance, is one which fosters hate.

At U32, it is very common to hear students use racial slurs in a disgusting attempt to be humorous.

¹ <https://www.usccr.gov/pubs/sac/vt1003/vt1003.pdf>

Some take it even farther. On one occasion this year, a student said to me “I will lynch you”.

I have made my concerns clear to my Social Studies teacher this year, regarding the eurocentricity of the curriculum. That is, the fact that we exclusively focused on European cultures.

In fact, the teacher agreed with me on this.

It was the same story in my ninth grade social studies class. The curriculum virtually excluded the teaching of non-european cultures until the unit on World Religions. I might add that these were still taught, however, in conjunction with lessons on the dominant cultures.

I recall a lesson on the caste system which failed to mention in any way, the role that colonialism played in exacerbating and creating caste-based violence.

It is extremely troubling to me that students of color are not taught our own histories as part of the curriculum.

If we are, we are taught incomplete versions of our histories which gloss over fundamental facts about oppression of our people.

H.3 is a groundbreaking and direly needed bill, since it goes to and acknowledges the root of the problem. But this is just the beginning.

The bill creates a working group whose members will look at reviewing and revising the standards, the framework used by teachers and curriculum directors, and ensuring that the standards:

- “increase attention to the history, contribution, and perspectives of ethnic groups and social groups”
- “promote critical thinking regarding the history, contributions, and perspectives of ethnic groups and social groups”
- “commit the school to eradicating any racial bias in its curriculum”

In closing, I would like to thank you again for giving me the opportunity to give my testimony on why this bill is necessary.

As a student of color, and somebody who has been the victim of racial harassment, I urge the committee to pass this bill. I will leave you with a rather relevant and, I believe, poignant quote by the late Nelson Mandela.

“No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background or his religion. People learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”

Thank you.