

H3 Testimony:

There is a quote that I love by Adrienne Rich that goes, "When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you...when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing. It takes some strength of soul--and not just individual strength, but collective understanding--to resist this void, this non-being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard." Remember that as I tell you this:

- A teacher makes her students lay on the ground close together so they can get a sense of what slavery was like.
- A student threatens to kill all the black kids at a school and the school determines that it was "just a joke", and the student is allowed to return to school the next day, while some parents of students of color are afraid to send their kids to school because they found out through their child rather than from school officials. When asked why the superintendent didn't alert families to the threat, the response was "Well, I can't do that! THAT would be racist!"
- A teacher forces kids to say the N word while reading *Huckleberry Finn* and is reprimanded, but allowed to stay.
- A black educator leaves because district administrators do not value their expertise as the longest standing member of their department, and instead asks them to mentor someone with no license to become the head of their department, even though the black educator is highly regarded by the Agency of Education and other officials.
- A student is punished more harshly for the same infraction than co-conspirators of the same act.
- A black educator is passed over multiple times for a position, told that they don't have enough experience, only to see that same position go to an educator with no experience.
 - A black kindergartener is hit by his teacher for doing the same exact behavior as his classmates. The school covers it up, refuses to investigate until the parent pushes the issue, and then brings the child into a room with his abuser, the principal and other educators to tell them that it wasn't that bad and he needs to apologize to the teacher. The teacher got to stay.

I could go on about the stories, experiences, and complaints that I hear about what is happening in the Rutland Area schools. In the two years since we were chartered, the Rutland Area Branch of the NAACP has received more complaints about education than any other subject, each one more alarming than the next. And I know that Rutland Area Schools are not alone, which is what brings us all here today.

Whether it is invisibility in the classroom, poor or no curricular representation, unfair and discriminatory labor practices or unequal treatment as perpetrators or victims of a variety of infractions, Vermont's students of color are not getting what they deserve. And neither are the white children. I remember one day, one of my favorite students visited me after visiting a friend at Boston Children's Hospital. As she told me about her experience, she paused to say, "Ms. P! I was so scared when I was there!" Her eyes large with fear, I asked her why, to which she replied, "there were SO MANY black people!" Now, there are a few things wrong with this picture, but let's focus mainly on the student. This young woman who loved, respected and trusted me was utterly afraid to even SEE people who look different than her. No one spoke to her, no one accosted her, no one did anything at all, except exist. And that was too much for her. Between lack of exposure in her life and lack of exposure in her education, this young woman could not even SEE someone different without being afraid. And this example is not unique.

Now, I don't think that we are going to solve the problem of the lack of people of color in Vermont over night (and yes, that **is** a problem)- there are so many broken systems to repair that this particular endeavor will take far more time before large numbers of people of color even consider coming to our state as an option--but there is something we can do right now to help repair the gaps in our education system. The State Board of Education could have already done something to remedy these issues, but they have not done nearly enough. For whatever reason. Supporting H. 3 is a good step in the right directions

We can do better. We MUST do better. Students of color are facing the same exact struggle to be reflected in their communities as I did when I left Vermont in 1996. That is unacceptable. White students are still afraid of people of color, even though, because of technology, our world is shrinking and we have more access to different people, and cultures, and ways of knowing and learning than ever before. Queer kids are suffering in silence, and we all know the consistently validated reports about students with disabilities. And it is no coincidence that the people most often omitted from curricula are also those most likely to fair poorly in the education system.

And, if the old adage is true-that in order to know where you are going, you must first know where you have been, then we are certainly going nowhere fast without the inclusion of indigenous culture and history, as it is the backbone and the cradle for all that exists in our country today.

Friends, if we are to be a successful people, we must be a well-educated people, and that education must be founded on the principle of equity. Equity in treatment for students, equity in curriculum, and equity in representation at every level of our educational system. While the third of these will certainly take longer for our state to catch up on, the other two can begin to be addressed by this critical piece of legislation. Failure to do so will undoubtedly, as history shows us, uphold the systems of supremacy that relegate thousands of Vermonters into silence, and make all of our children vulnerable to ignorance, hateful, racist ideology. This is NOT what our children deserve.

In reviewing the recent changes to the bill, I and other members of the coalition are quite concerned about the addition of religion.

- We are concerned the inclusion of religion may place the entire effort in jeopardy through legal challenges or worse, and be manipulated in ways that will allow for further abuses against marginalized people to occur. This work moves forward in its current form without the benefit of clarity and discussion amongst those most impacted by it. It would be devastating to have this effort halted down the road because we were caught unaware of the potential implications.
- We are concerned that we have not gained clarity on any impacts regarding the separation of church and state with the inclusion of religious language in the bill.
- S. 1: Strengthening America's Security in the Middle East Act of 2019, Title IV of which is the Combatting BDS Act, presents a challenge in the creation of precedent for silencing free speech and a redefinition of antisemitism with regards to the criticism of the state of Israel.
- There are concerns about tracking and inquiring of religious affiliations of students in Vermont schools.
- Clarity is needed to understand the application of the changed definition for ethnic groups to include: "groups that have been historically subject to persecution or genocide"
- On January 30, 2019, we put forth a survey to the two dozen members of our coalition on the language changes, and with an 80% response rate.
 - There was broad agreement among coalition members on all proposed changes with exception of two key amendments to both the findings section and the reporting requirements. The survey yielded that only 54% of our members supported adding religion as a category for data collection in incident reporting.