

Dear Members of the Education Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly:

My name is Merrie Harrison. I was a New Haven Public School Teacher for 33 years and am now retired. I honor and respect the work of SEJ. I support Bill7082 with SEJ's amendments.

I am a white woman who was raised in Orange during the turbulent 60's and 70's. When I became a teacher, I devoted all of my energy to make a difference in the black and brown population in New Haven. I married an African American man and raised bi-racial boys in Madison. I taught in the Newhallville section of New Haven for most of my career. The inequity, injustice and ignorance that was (and still is) alive and well in "good" liberal white colleagues, friends and neighbors was painful to say the least.

There were daily examples of racism that I could share. I will focus on the most striking and destructive example in New Haven and a bit about our experience in Madison.

For a period of 4 years, I worked in 12 different schools in New Haven supporting over 130 teachers implementing new curriculum. I worked closely with each teacher as well as the administrators – over 160 educators. In my interactions, several things became apparent:

- a vast majority of the adults did not understand the challenges that faced our students on a daily basis and disciplined them without regard for the student's anger and frustration over their life situation clearly created by a racism
- over half of the adults revealed strong prejudices against the students of color and preference for the white students
- with few exceptions new teachers revealed that they only took the job in New Haven until they could get a "better one" in the suburbs
- regularly, adults' biases impacted their behavior toward the students that they served - taking out their own prejudgments on the students causing the students to suffer for the adult's ignorance and prejudices
- teachers in "good" schools (in wealthier neighborhoods) displayed all the same behaviors in more subtle forms, yet, no less destructive

In Madison, there is an ABC Program housing 5-6 young men of color from distant cities. The intention is to give them "A Better Chance" in life. This in itself reveals some issues. However, I got to know the young men in the program. I was aware of the challenges that faced them as well as my sons' experiences. Some of the challenges are listed below:

- statements that group all Blacks, Latinos or Asians in a particular category - often negative
- being treated like a novelty or being used to make others feel like "good" caring white people
- hearing the "N" word being used regularly without any correction by adults
- assumptions about the students' families
- being required to assimilate – devaluing their individuality
- being accused of something that was clearly a racist assumption

- academic abilities minimized
- inaccurate history being taught – minimizing harm to Native Americans and Africans
- overlooking history of Africans before they became enslaved people as well as before Jim Crow – ignoring the well developed early societies and culture
- dismissing the history of racism - ignoring the truth about our leaders
- overlooking other cultures in the curriculum except on “special occasions”.
- Discussion of Dr. Martin Luther King Day being taken off of the school calendar

The above lead to feelings of being less than and insignificant. Attempts to share a different perspective were often minimized, dismissed or ignored.

This bill is essential to change the culture of Connecticut. Although Connecticut considers itself a liberal state and has many well-meaning citizens, intention is not sufficient. Educating our administrators and teachers regarding accurate history of African Americans, Latinos and Race in the United States as well as issues related to race and racism is essential to actually embracing our entire population and impacting real change that will benefit each and every Connecticut resident.

We are missing the richness of diversity. By minimizing others we lose our humanity.

To rediscover community that is united requires all members to be valued. Including the truth of our History of Race and Racism in our curriculum will be difficult and painful, but also freeing. Seeing where this situation came from will empower us to be different, take action that value all in ways that we have not yet seen. Including the History of African Americans and Latinos will enrich our consciousness and provide opportunity for connection and change. We owe it to our children, grandchildren and beyond to set the table for them to feast on the treasures of the Beloved Community where all are embraced, valued and respected.

Thank you for your time,

Merrie Harrison