

March 6, 2019

Katherine Jones
86A Davis Street
New Haven, CT 06515

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

My name is Katherine Jones, I am a writer and an educator from New Haven, CT and I am a supporter of SEJ and a member of the Elm City Undoing Racism Collective. I support Bill7082 with SEJ's amendments. This bill is important to me because I have spent the past ten years attempting to learn how and why we are still operating in such an unfair and unjust educational system, and how to change it for the better. I see our school system as one of the most critical foundational parts of our country, and both within school structures and beyond them, it is clear how far we still have to go to reach justice and equity- and I don't see how we can ever walk that path without first having access to the whole truth of how we got so disparate and desperate in the first place, and what role institutions have played historically and currently. At the very least, I want us to provide all students- across race, culture and class differences- a fair and excellent education, and this requires having a shared awareness and language for the systemic obstacles that prevent us from doing so.

I grew up in Woodbridge, CT and graduated from Amity High School in 2002. I identify as white and Jewish. As a student, I remember learning about slavery and current events as though they were naturally occurring disasters that happened far away and long ago, and that most importantly, everything had been repaired and everyone is now seen as equal. The message I received from numerous teachers over many years of school created a cognitive dissonance for me; could see plainly that my friends of color were not treated as well as myself and other white and white-passing friends. I could easily tell that many adults in and outside of our school were "just racist" and that inevitably some of the kids were picking up and internalizing the same patterns of hate.

After graduating from College of Charleston in South Carolina in 2006, I spent years honing my capacity to work with young people and effect change I hoped to see in the world. Over the span of 13 years I worked as a paraprofessional in Amity Middle School in Orange, as a preschool teacher at Handprints North Haven, an academic counselor at LEAP, an ecology teacher at Common Ground Summer Camp, a program director and educator at Solar Youth, an educator at Elm Village. I have had a lot of exposure and experience with youth in all grade levels k-12 both inside schools and outside of schools.

In 2014, I attended a weekend-long "Youth Undoing Racism" training with a few of my high school aged interns in New Haven. This training revealed the fact that my education was not only incomplete, but also had been false- and was no exception but rather is the norm, strategically built in in order to maintain oppression on unconscious and conscious levels. At the training, I also learned from youth and staff in the room about the racism-related interactions and circumstances that had either tainted or fully sabotaged their learning and teaching (and graduation) journeys or experiences. I began to see how I was doing harm to children (and adults) of color, even though I had always been an advocate and cheerleader for them and had many loved ones who are people of color. My understanding and knowledge were flawed- I did not see that, until I did. And more importantly I could make choices and behaviors that would have the impact I'd desired instead of replaying cycles of oppression and inequality- harms and cycles which are often overt but also often are subtle and nearly undetectable without analysis.

I am a supporting adult of SEJ, because they are youth-centered, youth-led. In my experience, I have rarely if ever seen adults practicing listening to youth. Teachers especially seem trained to act like they have all the answers and are tasked with "maintaining order" in whatever ways are available to them.

When white teachers have students of color, we have seen countless numbers showing how disproportionately they punish those students, and the ways the students' lives are affected in a cycle of punishment (the school-to-prison pipeline is one example). SEJ not only states it, but acts in accordance with the value that youth voices are crucial and must be counted when discussing and deliberating on issues that affect them, especially in education. I attended my first meeting with SEJ when they were beginning to form, and I have attended several panel discussions that they have co-sponsored.

Learning and teaching the history of race and racism in the U.S first of all, would help students and teachers alike realize that the apparent inequalities we see every day are not a result of natural ability or worthiness, but are the result of a system designed for such, the poisoned roots of a tree. This crucial lesson is the foundation of understanding, and provides necessary space for students and teachers to address the system of oppression, rather than struggling over how to handle the poisoned fruits. There is so much to the story that we are not taught in schools, beyond the duality of black victims and white monsters. White children and teachers will benefit to transcend shame and guilt and denial associated with racism, and will be empowered to make choices from who they are at the core of their characters rather than what they've been told to be- savior or master or bystander. Genuine respect, relationships, and community can be built with self-awareness and a network of support in this framework. We are never outside of racial context, so being able to name it and make choices within it will empower everyone.

Required racial bias trainings for social studies teachers and administrators would mean professional and personal development for staff, who may be completely unaware of their own biases and unfair treatment of students, families and whole communities of color. For staff who are aware of and emboldened with their racial biases, formal training across the department will create a network of accountability and support to deal with issues arising. I hear well-meaning and trained teachers lamenting about how they can't do anything to address the harms of their co-workers or administrators, all of whom hold student's lives in their hands. Again, shared lessons, understanding, and language would be very useful and would mitigate harm and stress for both students and faculty.

A curriculum-building and oversight committee within the State Department of Education will be needed to create, or approve, and ensure and implement the necessary amendment.

My vision for our future is that we will use our collective voices and resources to build greater connection with ourselves, each other, and the land, so that we can live in a harmonious and healthy way. At the very least, with this bill and the amendments, our young people will have an experience of safety and being seen like never before. And at best, our imaginations and evolution will manifest into a world with justice, collaboration, liberation and abundance for all.

Thank you for your time,

Katherine "Katie" Jones