

Chair Bird, Vice Chair Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and Honorable Members of the Ohio House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on House Bill 11, also known as the Backpack Bill.

My name is Liesl Jacobs and I live in Oakwood, Ohio. There are many reasons why I support the Backpack Bill, many of which have already been or will be shared today, but I would like to share my own personal reason for supporting the Bill. During the 2020-2021 school year, I heard many concerning stories about CRT and its ideology being taught in public schools across our great country. I will admit that at that time I very naively believed Oakwood administrators would never even consider allowing these controversial beliefs to be taught in our schools, because they understood it was in the districts best interest to avoid any negative attention and they would instead continue to focus on their well established and recognized reputation of academic excellence. I also mistakenly believed they respected and valued their partnership with parents and they understood how pushing a political agenda could cause concern amongst many in the community. Over the next year, it became increasingly evident just how naïve I had been and how little regard Oakwood administrators, and some on the school board, have for parents who question their intentions.

I first became concerned about Oakwood possibly introducing CRT ideology in our schools in July 2021 after watching a video on the schools website titled "The Next Right Thing". In the video, members of the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion task force stated they have "spent the last year developing a vision, values, beliefs, and a multi-tiered action plan towards promoting equity and inclusion in our schools," that would make changes to 3 C's in upcoming years: culture, curriculum, and community. They made many ambiguous statements in the video such as, it will take "...hard work to achieve and maintain our vision....and we will need to live in a state of self-reflection and adjustment ensuring our deliberate course towards these goals". They asked parents and the community "...to join them in their commitment to embracing the uncomfortable and adjusting as necessary". And most concerning to my husband and I, they stated "...we must prepare our students for the world in which they will find themselves...it is our greatest responsibility as educators". This concerned us because we very strongly believe it is OUR greatest responsibility as parents to prepare our children to live in this world, not the school's responsibility. I sent the superintendent an email in which I asked very direct questions about each of these statements such as, who is going to have to live in a state of self-reflection and how and what will they be in self-reflection about. I asked what parents should do if their discomfort isn't due to the growth and change needed to achieve their vision, but rather it is due to them disagreeing with the values, beliefs, and action plan of the EDI task force. Would parents be expected to just adjust? And I asked for clarification on why the district felt it was their educator's greatest responsibility to teach values and beliefs, as I thought their greatest responsibility was to teach our children reading, writing, and arithmetic. I closed by asking for a copy of the EDI task force's vision, values, beliefs and multi-tiered action plan so that I could better understand their objective. The superintendent felt it would be best if I met with him and the curriculum director in person, which I did, but when I left the meeting I was no closer to understanding the districts intentions and I was told they could not provide a copy of the action plan because they were still working on it.

Shortly after our meeting, a public records request uncovered numerous district emails which contained references to concepts of Critical Race Theory, including in minutes from high level District meetings planning the development of the EDI program, in professional development programs presented to school staff, and in an email to the EDI task force explicitly promoting the teaching of CRT in K-12 schools with examples of how educators can discuss these concepts with young people. I questioned the curriculum director about what I had read in those emails and asked what she planned on introducing into the district's curriculum. She only relied, "Your questions do not refer to the Ohio Learning Standards, which is the basis of our curriculum". She did not denounce any of the concepts as being inappropriate for young people despite being asked her opinion.

I sent numerous emails to the superintendent over the following months in an attempt to understand what changes were going to be implemented in our schools and made to the curriculum: however I either never received a response or when I did, I was given vague answers which only led to more questions and more emails. Interestingly, public records requests proved that Oakwood administrators had agreed to only provide talking points when meeting with parents to discuss their concerns about CRT and they did not want to put out a statement assuring the community CRT and its concepts would not be taught due to concern that it would "...limit our teachers". One administrator stated the following in an email to the director of curriculum, "I would prefer we say what we do, not what we don't".

My husband and I then met with the school board president to discuss our concerns about the lack of transparency on the part of the superintendent and other administrators. He asked if allowing a group of parents to attend EDI task force meetings would help alleviate our concerns and we both enthusiastically replied yes. When I followed up with him, he stated he and the superintendent "...had conferred and at this time here was no plan for general attendance at the EDI meetings". When I asked why parents could not attend and be privy to what was being planned for our children, he stated he disagreed that the superintendent, or anyone, "...is deliberately preventing parent access, or attempting to evade awareness", and went on to state it would be his final reply on the email thread.

I then requested EDI task force meetings be recorded, I asked to attend staff professional development trainings or for those to be recorded, I asked for any handouts teachers were given at those trainings, I asked for electronic or hard copies of information provided to the superintendent and staff during Montgomery County Educational Service Center trainings, and even asked if I could attend those trainings. I was told "no" to every one of those requests.

The district did release a 'Plan for Access and Success for All' in October 2021 outlining their beliefs in regards to what the "culture" should be like within the schools and the actions they planned to take to accomplish each of these beliefs. There actions were very vague. For example, they stated they plan on creating and publishing a "shared language" document; they will create, review and update processes to foster inclusive environments for all; and they will partner with area groups and communities. There were no details given explaining exactly how

they were going to accomplish these actions. This plan did not help clarify my understanding of what changes were going to be made and only left me with even more questions.

Prior to the school board election in November 2021, an anonymous letter was sent to the community raising concerns about CRT and other controversial sexual and social agendas being advanced or strongly considered within the school district and the lack of transparency on the part of administrators. The letter encouraged voters to vote for the two candidates who had vowed to demand transparency from the district if elected. The night before the election, the superintendent of Oakwood schools sent out an email to every parent in the district in which he claimed this letter was "...libelous and slanderous misinformation" and stated he had "...answered all questions that had been raised". In his email, he attempted to mislead parents into believing outside groups had infiltrated our community with the intent to cause fear and stated he "...wasn't even sure the people complaining are from our community". He also attempted to undermine and discredit parents who had questioned what the EDI task force was planning by falsely implying they do not want all students in Oakwood to feel welcomed and to be successful. The two candidates who had run on the need for transparency lost the election, and my husband and I decided then to withdraw our children from Oakwood schools at the end of the school year. We were still no closer to knowing the specific plans of the EDI task force for our schools, but it had become very clear to us that many Oakwood administrators and school board members did not value and respect our role as parents and our responsibility to protect and speak up on behalf of our children when we had concerns. We asked ourselves, how could we, as responsible and loving parents, allow our children to attend school for nearly 7 hours a day, 5 days a week, in a district that refused to clearly and specifically answer any and all of our questions about such controversial topics? The answer was very obvious, we could not.

Many of our friends have asked why we continue to live in Oakwood, where our property taxes are the highest in the area, while also paying out of pocket to send our three children to Dayton Christian. My reply is, why would we completely turn our children's lives upside down by not only withdrawing them from the schools they love, but at the same time moving them out of the only home they have known, away from their friends, away from our amazing neighbors, the traditions they look forward to each year in our community, and the amazing amenities we have come to love in Oakwood that no other surrounding community can offer. After many years of schooling, my husband and I are fortunate enough to be able to afford to stay in Oakwood and send our children to DC. But the money we pay for private tuition was supposed to go towards paying off our combined student loans of over \$200,000, our retirement, our children's college fund, and paying off our mortgage. Why should we be punished financially because we decided it was of the utmost importance to send our children to a school where our role as parents is valued and respected, and where we can feel confident knowing the values and beliefs they are taught at school align with those we teach at home? We did everything right. We moved to a district with the highest rated schools so that our children received the best possible education. The Oakwood school district let us down.

My heart goes out to the parents in Oakwood, and other public-school districts across Ohio, who are questioning what is being taught or promoted in the classroom and are ignored or gaslighted, and either they don't have any other options for their children due to their financial situation or they have to sacrifice their financial goals in order to send their children to a private school, like we had to. The Backpack Bill will empower parents to stand up for their children when they have concerns and will allow ALL parents the freedom to solely focus on what is the best educational option for their children.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony on the Backpack Bill. I urge you to vote yes on this legislation and would be happy to answer any questions.