

Proponent Testimony House Bill 155

Chairwoman Fowler Arthur, Vice-Chair Odioso, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 155.

As a school board member in the Mentor Exempted Village School District and a current board member of the Ohio School Board Constitutional Coalition, I am writing today to voice my strong support for House Bill 155, which aims to remove Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) practices from K-12 schools in Ohio. While DEI initiatives were originally introduced to promote inclusivity, their implementation has instead resulted in ideological indoctrination, unnecessary division, and a breakdown of trust between schools and the communities they serve. It is time to refocus our education system on academic excellence and unity rather than divisive political agendas.

Our own district spent nearly half a million dollars on mandatory staff and teacher training that pushed extreme ideological views. These sessions included discussions on "white privilege" and a "wheel of privilege" that categorized individuals based on skin color and sexual orientation. They also referenced radical author Ibram X. Kendi and his views on systemic oppression, instructing educators to "examine the oppressive nature behind enforcing standard English." Teachers were encouraged to restructure their daily schedules to include DEI-driven perspectives, rather than focusing on core academic instruction.

The training emphasized that being an anti-racist requires "yielding positions of power to those otherwise marginalized." During my first year as a board member, we conducted a superintendent search and selected the most qualified candidate who happened to be a white male married to a woman. However, according to the "wheel of privilege" presented in the training, he holds the highest level of privilege, and under its framework, our choice would be considered inappropriate solely because of his identity. By these standards, rejecting him in favor of someone from a marginalized group would have been the only acceptable course of action, and failing to do so would result in being labeled racist.

This approach completely disregards merit-based achievements, sending the wrong message to students. We already know that students often ask, "Is this for a grade?"—implying that if there is no tangible reward for effort, they may not fully apply themselves. Training like this discourages students from striving for excellence if outcomes are predetermined by identity rather than merit. This is not the lesson I want our schools to teach, and it's certainly not the standard that should be shaping our future leaders.

Alarmed by the implications of this training, I launched a social media group for parents and community members who believed it undermined their parental rights and misused taxpayer dollars. The issue first came to my attention when several teachers, frustrated by the divisive nature of the material, came forward. They felt it conflicted with their values and failed to represent our community.

As the group gained traction, hundreds of parents, retired teachers, and staff members joined, united in their concerns. Among them were parents of bi-racial children who expressed deep unease about the victim/oppressor ideology embedded in the training. They questioned how their children would be categorized. Would they be deemed victims or oppressors? Their distress only reinforced the urgency of taking action. Determined to address these issues, we organized a strong presence at a board meeting, ensuring our voices were heard.

Alarming, this training had not even been formally approved by the board. While the large expenditure should have been noticed in the check register, it was overlooked. As is common in many districts, professional development courses

do not require board approval—an oversight that needs to be addressed. This bill aims to directly impact professional development policies, ensuring that DEI-driven content, including divisive victim/oppressor narratives, will no longer be incorporated into staff and teacher training.

The impact on our district has been significant. Over the past five years, our public-school enrollment has dropped by 12%, resulting in 935 fewer students. Frustrated by the direction of public education, families have increasingly turned to alternatives, with home education rising by 62% and private school enrollment growing by 31%. This trend along with a recently failed levy, underscores a widespread dissatisfaction with the school board's ongoing refusal to align with the values of the local community. When schools place political agendas above academic excellence, families take notice—and take action.

My family has felt the direct consequences of these changes. For the past five years, I have been homeschooling my children—a choice I never imagined making. As a proud alumna of Mentor Schools, I had always envisioned my children benefiting from the same strong education I received over two decades ago. My parents, both retired special education teachers, still live in the district, and my deep-rooted connection to this community led me to purchase the home I grew up in, confident that my kids would share the same positive school experience my siblings and I once had.

However, that expectation was shattered by the district's relentless DEI strategies and rigid COVID mandates. These imposed changes left me feeling that my children's education was being shaped by divisive ideologies rather than academic excellence. Faced with an environment that no longer reflected my family's values or priorities, I had no choice but to pull my children from public school. That difficult decision ultimately compelled me to run for the school board, determined to advocate for restoring the high educational standards and principles that once defined our district.

After the implementation of this training and the growing pushback from parents in meetings and on social media, a DEI group leader in our district made deeply troubling remarks. He made comments during board meetings that we must be willing to accept the loss of "white flight" from our schools and city due to "white lashing," which he seemed to characterize as a reactionary response from white individuals. It is deeply concerning that this individual holds a leadership position as an assistant principal in the nearby district of Cleveland Heights-University Heights. This training appeared to empower him to repeatedly use divisive rhetoric in public forums, further inflaming tensions within the community.

As complaints about his involvement in the DEI group mounted, parents and community members took action, ultimately leading to the dissolution of the group. Yet, despite this development, other DEI-driven policies and practices still persist within our district, continuing to shape educational priorities. The lasting influence of these ideologies highlights the urgent need for greater oversight and accountability in determining professional development programs and curriculum standards.

Divisive ideologies have spread beyond staff training into classrooms and libraries, further eroding trust in public education. Middle school libraries featured *Transphobia—Deal With It and Become a Gender Transcender*, labeling students "transphobic" for believing in two genders. Despite concerns, it was retained with a 4-1 board vote, prioritizing ideological conformity over discussion.

Some other elementary k-5 DEI book selections include *Heather Has Two Mommies*, *Colin Kaepernick: From Free Agent to Change Agent*, and *And Tango Makes Three*. Additionally, elementary library books like *Right Now: Real Kids Speaking Up for Change* explore immigration laws, Middle Eastern conflicts, climate activism, and transgender ideology.

This book features transgender activist Jazz Jennings, stating, *"When she was born, the doctors thought she was a boy. (It happens sometimes.) But Jazz is a girl. Call her she."* Despite being challenged, it was retained with a 3-2 vote. The decision to keep this book led several parents to withdraw their children immediately from our district and enroll them in private schools.

These books, framed as DEI, promote activism rather than education, deepening division and mistrust. Instead of fostering inclusivity, DEI practices reinforce ideological separation, encouraging students to label and condemn rather than understand.

This issue extends far beyond my district. As a board member of the OSBCC, I have seen firsthand that districts across Ohio are grappling with the same harmful effects of DEI-driven policies. The widespread nature of this problem underscores the urgent need to address these practices and restore academic integrity in our schools.

This bill arrives at a pivotal moment. While President Trump called for an executive order to limit DEI initiatives, enforcement in schools remains stalled due to an injunction. Additionally, the recently enacted Parent’s Bill of Rights has not impacted the availability of these books in our schools. At our last board meeting, the superintendent confirmed that all books currently in circulation—whether part of the curriculum classroom silent reading selections, or library collections—will remain accessible and unchanged.

For these reasons, I urge support for House Bill 155. Eliminating divisive initiatives will restore trust in our schools and refocus education on its true purpose of academic excellence. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

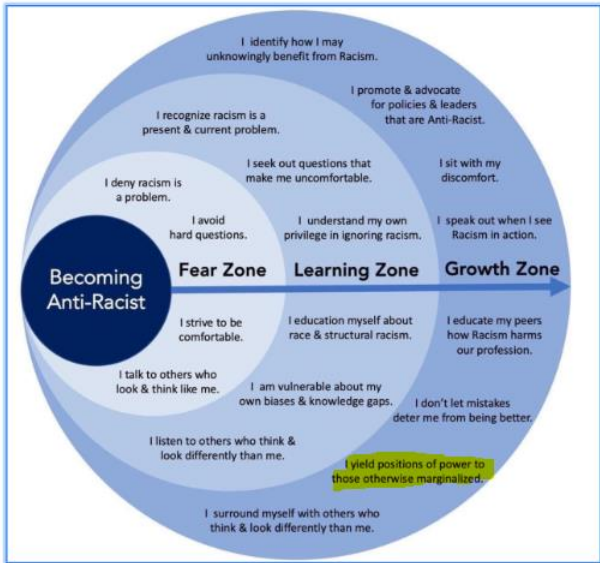
Annie Payne

Mentor Exempted Village School District Board Member
Ohio School Board Constitutional Coalition Board Member

Below are references from the professional development training mentioned in my testimony:

Examining HOW To Critique

| Science | Math | ELA | ESOL |
|---|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Examine the effects of capitalism on the environment and biological systems -Study environmental racism and its effects at local, national, and international levels -Discuss misogyny and racism in STEM fields and how to counter it -Highlight the scientific contributions of BIPOC | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Have students use statistics, algebra, etc. to analyze the rates and effects of different social problems and injustices in areas such as banking, the criminal justice system, education, housing, etc. -Use math for a purpose, in context, and not in the abstract (to analyze and discuss social problems) -Radical Math or The Underrepresentation Curriculum Project | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Choose texts that address themes related to systems of oppression and social justice, especially written by BIPOC -Bring student voices and experiences into the discussion of texts and allow them to personally relate to the materials and its themes -Critically analyze all texts and ask higher order thinking questions to get students thinking about systems of oppression -Allow students to research systems of oppression and write about their own experiences or those of people in their lives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Examine and use English language structures as a means to discuss social issues while bringing student voices and stories into the discussion -Examine the oppressive nature behind enforcing "Standard English" -Study and affirm the validity of various dialects |



Think - Where do you see yourself landing on this anti-racism scale?

Pair - BO rooms

Share - whole group

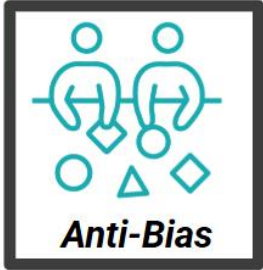
refer to your agenda for the larger visual



Social and Racial Justice Lenses



Restorative



Anti-Bias

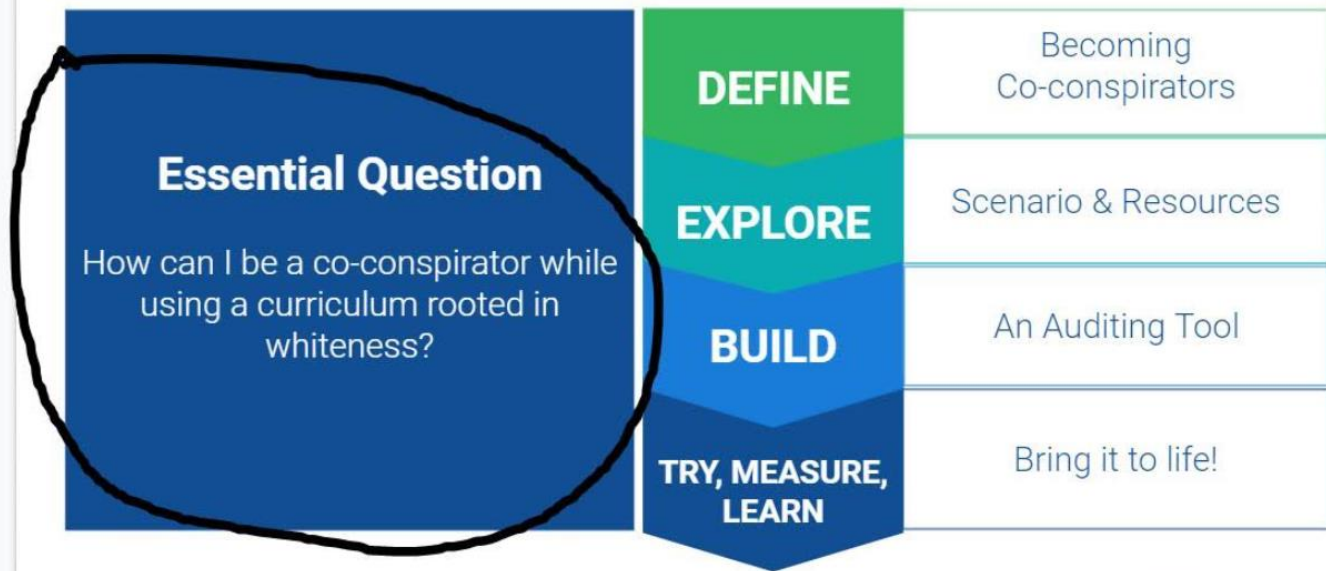


Systems



Action

Today's Session



Confronting Self

“Anti-racist work means acknowledging that racist beliefs and structures are pervasive in all aspects of our lives—from education to housing to climate change—and then actively doing work to tear down those beliefs and structures. Those beliefs and structures **don't just exist in primarily white/and or privileged institutions—they thrive there.**”

-Christina Torres, *Teaching Tolerance*

WHEEL OF POWER/PRIVILEGE



Adapted from ccrweb.ca

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