

Privilege in Parker
By Judith Sears

On December 3, 2021, Krista Cooley of Parker, Colorado received the kind of call no parent wants to receive. Her twelve-year-old son was on the line. “Mom,” he said, “I can’t breathe. I think I’m having a panic attack. I need you to come and get me right now!”

Alarmed, Cooley hurried to Sagewood Middle School to pick up her son. On the ride home, he explained that special counselors had led the seventh grade’s social studies class in an activity similar to a “Privilege Walk,” which forces students to state the ways they’re privileged in comparison to others.

Cooley’s son recalled that students were asked several questions, starting with, “Step over the line if you have had privileges because of your race.” Another question was “Are you close to someone of the LGBT community?” What was the correct answer? If Cooley’s son didn’t have an LGBT friend, did that mean he was against the LGBT community? Some of the questions had a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” flavor.

When the activity culminated with another 12-year-old sharing a story about the suicide of an LGBT friend, Cooley’s son left the room and called her. “It was just too much for him to process,” Cooley says. “He’s an empathetic and sensitive boy and I love that about him.”

Neither the students nor parents had received any advance notice of this special activity. Cooley immediately reached out to the school principal, Ben D’Ardenne and one of the counselors who’d led the activity.

That afternoon, Cooley and D’Ardenne had a long and ultimately fruitless telephone conversation. Cooley quickly realized how involved the conversation was going to be and, fearing that she would not recall the details accurately, recorded it with her cell phone.

Cooley recalls that D'Ardenne, who refused to call the activity a "privilege walk," denied that any of the questions had been about race. He claimed that the questions had been along the lines of, "Have you had privileges?" Cooley's son, new to the school, specifically recalled that the term "race" had been used and the discomfort he had felt. During the conversation, the principal read some of the questions to Cooley, pausing frequently between questions. Cooley wondered if the pauses were due to questions being skipped or re-worded. She asked the principal to email a full list of questions to her.

Toward the end of the conversation, D'Ardenne promised to provide the Cooley's with one of the school's "purple cards," which excuses students from activities.

Other parents of Sagewood Middle Schoolers learned of Cooley's experience through a parent advocacy group's social media page. They reported similar activities programmed for students at Sagewood Middle School and confirmed the questions and wording as Cooley's son had recalled them. The parents reported taking the issue up with the principal but receiving no response.

Cooley pursued the issue, emailing the Superintendent of Schools, Corey Wise, about her concerns. Wise forwarded her email to the principal and three school board members.

By December 14 – eleven days later – Cooley had not received the activity questions or the purple "activity excuse" card from the principal. Unwilling to let the matter drop, she addressed a Douglas County School Board meeting about her son's experience. Cooley doesn't consider herself a practiced public speaker, but her remarks had an impact. "Depicting children as either privileged or victims due to unchangeable characteristics is not how we raise successful

adults,” she said and added, “These programs are divisive, regressive and not the school’s role to impose on our children.”

After the meeting, Cooley learned that the principal had told one of the district board members that he had spoken with Cooley several times on the phone and had sent her the list of questions from the activity – neither of which had happened.

After once again emailing the principal, three school board members, and Superintendent Wise, Cooley finally received the list of questions from the principal. However, the list D’Ardenne provided did not match what her son and other parents recalled and what Cooley had heard in her first conversation with him. Some questions were omitted. Other questions of a lighter nature had been added.

In subsequent email communications, Cooley emailed the principal an audio clip of their first conversation in which the principal read some of the questions he now claimed had not been on the list. She also copied other school district personnel, including Danny Winsor, Executive Director of Schools for the Parker Region, on the email. Winsor immediately contacted Cooley and promised to “follow up” on her concerns. D’Ardenne contacted Cooley and invited her to meet with him and counselors in early 2022. Having little trust in the school’s administration, Cooley declined the meeting with D’Ardenne.

In the meantime, word of Cooley’s experience had reached Lauren Boll, the FAIR Colorado state coordinator. She contacted Cooley and urged her to file a report through FAIR’s transparency page (fairtransparency.org) “This has been a great example of how powerful the FAIR transparency tool is,” says Boll. “We’ve been putting the word out that if anyone has felt uncomfortable or shamed to file a report.”

Currently, the Sagewood Middle School incident seems stalled in a “he said, she said” status. In early January, Cooley learned from a counselor that the social studies activity – the-don’t-call-it-privilege-privilege-walk – would be going forward. Cooley’s son received the purple card excusing him from participation, but Cooley hopes other parents will get involved. “Parents are afraid to stand up because of what people might think. We’re afraid to look like a racist or like we’re against the LGBT community. That’s not the case. These were not age-appropriate activities, and they cross the line between parenting and education,” she says.

FAIR’s legal team is aware of the exercise and encourages parents of Sagewood Middle School students who have familiarity with this social studies exercise or similar activities to contact FAIR through fairtransparency.org. FAIR’s legal team will continue its evaluation of the facts, circumstances, and potential legal implications surrounding the “privilege walk” exercise.

Challenging race-essentialist curricula is slow-going, but parents and teachers are not alone. “It’s okay to speak out,” Cooley urges. “It doesn’t make you a bad person.”