

The Foundation Against Intolerance and Racism (FAIR) is a nonpartisan organization dedicated to advancing civil rights and liberties for all Americans, and promoting a common culture based on fairness, understanding and humanity.



March 14, 2023

VIA EMAIL

Education Finance Committee
Minnesota Senate
Minnesota Legislature

Re: Senate File No. 2684

Dear Members of the Senate Education Finance Committee:

We are the Twin Cities Chapter of the Foundation Against Intolerance & Racism (FAIR TC), a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing civil rights and liberties for all Americans and promoting a common culture based on fairness, understanding, and humanity. Our website, fairforall.org, can give you a fuller sense of our mission and activities. Thank you for your careful consideration of our thoughts regarding S.F. No. 2684, the K-12 omnibus education bill that was introduced on March 7, 2023.

I write to address just one provision of the omnibus bill: Article 2, Section 12, Subdivision 31. This provision provides over \$31 million in “culturally relevant practices” grants to be used “to implement and improve the conditions, strategies, resources, and training for equity, diversity, and inclusion...” Whether it is referred to as “culturally relevant pedagogy”, “culturally relevant practices”, “culturally responsive teaching”, or any variation thereof (herein, “CRP”), this approach to education promises to reduce or eliminate the achievement gap that students of color so often experience. While this is a laudable goal, CRP’s focus on attributes such as customs, languages, values, beliefs, and achievements, and its belief that such attributes may be assigned to particular racial or ethnic groups of individuals, is highly problematic.

CRP promotes the idea that teachers must develop their sociopolitical consciousness, and this is usually, though incorrectly, sold as a means by which good people can demonstrate their cultural competency. Teach for America, an advocate for CRP, states that sociopolitical consciousness means:

[T]hat teachers encourage students to think about and consistently question why things are the way they are and encourage students to see themselves as agents of social change and transformation. Students are therefore empowered to think and act in ways that challenge the inequitable status quo among people, within communities, and in society at large.”¹

¹ *How to Practice Culturally Relevant Pedagogy*, Teach For America, (January 6, 2019), <https://www.teachforamerica.org/stories/how-to-engage-culturally-relevant-pedagogy>

CRP considers these tenets to be practices and mindsets teachers must adopt, not merely strategies and tools. FAIR TC strongly disagrees that this belief system is a proper or effective foundation on which to reform Minnesota's K-12 public education system.²

First, and most importantly, FAIR TC's animating principle is that people should be treated as individuals, and not as merely carbon copies of some imagined racial or ethnic "essential original". It is ironic that the idealism and compassion that has led people to search for meaningful solutions, has also led them to accept views about race and ethnicity that are eerily reminiscent of ideas that most now regard as reactionary and repugnant. We must not allow ourselves to be dragged back into a time in which notions of race essentialism (i.e., the view that racial groups have underlying "essences" that represent deep-rooted, unalterable traits and abilities) are approved by polite society. We should instead insist that our public education system hone the attributes and values that create prosperity and fulfillment for free people—attributes and values that are common to and embraceable by all humans regardless of their racial or cultural roots.

Second, the CRP approach runs a very high risk of marginalizing the very individuals it seeks to help. In FAIR TC's view, all children in America, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, country of birth, or any other immutable characteristic, possess American culture as a birthright. When children are constantly told to center their "cultural identity", this sends the message that American culture is not for them. Obviously, every one of us has a heritage (whether Irish, Somali, Korean, or Peruvian) and the connections, personal and historical, invoked by and through these associations can be enriching and deeply meaningful. But at FAIR TC, we seek to promote a *common* culture based on fairness, understanding, and humanity. To be successful, a multi-ethnic, pluralistic society such as ours requires its citizens to adhere to a coherent set of principles and values (i.e., a "culture"), such as a belief in freedom of speech, respect for property rights, etc. Unfortunately, the practice of CRP runs a significant risk of alienating children from their peers as well as from their culture and their nation.

Third, the sustained focus on racial and ethnic differences is, purely from a resources perspective, inimical to the achievement of true equality in our society. An honest review of the data reveals that there is no clear correlation (let alone an established causal connection) between the deployment of CRP and improved student achievement. Further, education, as a profession, has historically been rife with fads³ that come and go, richly rewarding their purveyors and publishers, but providing very little in the way of results for the children who were supposed to benefit. We understand that the urge to "do something" can be powerful, and that spending substantial amounts on programs that have attractive names can be good politics, but we believe that, when it comes to the education of our young, expediency and politics must be set aside. The millions that will be lavished on an unproven system of pedagogy, CRP, should instead be spent on programs that (1) do not discriminate based on the race, ethnicity, etc., of the students involved, and (2) have been proven to be effective.

² The pending PELSB proposed final rule R4615 rewrites the Minnesota teacher standards (*Minnesota Rules 87100.2000*) using culturally relevant pedagogy and racial consciousness as the new framework. https://mn.gov/pelsb/assets/RD4615%202021.12.16%20%28Draft%204%29_tcm1113-514716.pdf

³ E.g., sight reading (whole language), "new" math, No Child Left Behind, "learning styles", Common Core, digital learning for a digital world, competency-based education, cooperative learning, Race to the Top, etc.

Thank you for taking the time to consider our position on S.F. No. 2684. We appreciate your service, understand how complex and fraught education policy can be, and share your overarching goal of improving educational outcomes for all Minnesotan children.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'J' followed by a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke.

Jeff Campbell
FAIR Twin Cities Chapter Leader