

Re: HF 3434

Matthew Berg-Wall, Ph.D.

MN House Education Policy Committee
Meeting February 25, 2022

Dear House Education Policy Committee Members,

First of all, thank you for considering a variety of perspectives on the content and consequences of HR 3434. I am a teacher of 20 years. My career as an English language teacher in Minnesota has been spent primarily working in highly diverse and economically disadvantaged communities, both rural and urban. My sense of ethnic diversity in Minnesota has developed through my work with Karen refugees, 2nd and 3rd generation Hmong, and children from well established Vietnamese communities. In delivering literacy support services, I have worked with Black students who would trace their ancestry to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and Black students who can recall Somali refugee camps in Kenya. I have worked with Guatemalan Hispanic students and Mexican Hispanic students. In summary, I have worked with ethnic groups from both voluntary and involuntary minority communities. I am writing in opposition to the falsely identified “Ethnic Studies” bill, HF 3434.

I want to begin by disposing of the thin “ethnic studies” rhetorical veil covering the substance and intent of the bill. The bill is transparently not pertinent to ethnic studies in its definitions. There is nothing in the study of ethnic diversity which necessitates that students analyze “the ways in which race and racism have been and continue to be powerful social, cultural, and political forces.” As a researcher of equity, a practitioner of ethnic studies in multiple public school settings, and a Ph.D. graduate from the U of M where I have studied leadership through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT), I can tell you that this language is entirely derived from CRT. CRT starts with racism as a presumptive force and then seeks to explain disparate outcomes in race-centering terms. To do so, it employs post-structuralist methodological tools like discourse analysis and counter storytelling to beg the question of its own limited theorizing.

In the language that defines ethnic studies as necessitating an analysis of “the connection of race to other groups of stratification, including gender, class, sexuality, and legal status,” the bill obviously incorporates Crenshaw’s provisional concept of intersectional oppression. Somehow elevated to theory despite the dearth of empirical evidence, intersectionality is the idea that oppression stacks with each supposed marginalized identity. Here, one should admit countervailing evidence like that of political scientist Wilford Reilly of Kentucky State University, a Historically Black University. Reilly demonstrated that, except with respect to class, disadvantage does not predictably increase as these identities combine or intersect. In other words, combining identities like gender, sexuality, legal status, and race does not predictably relate to increased disadvantage in terms of educational attainment, income, or corporate representation. Reilly refers to the argument made by Critical Race Theorists, intersectionalists, and other like-minded and well-intentioned elites as the CON, the Continued Oppression Narrative. CRT and intersectionality simply overtheorize the relevance of race, a point made repeatedly in scholarship. Thus, these theories and the “ethnic studies” perspective advanced by HF 3434 are not well supported empirically.

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HF 3434 is clearly not related to ethnic studies. Ethnic studies would take a comparative approach to understanding ethnic groups, which are not the same as racial groups. Ethnic studies would lean on the fields of anthropology and history rather than postmodern philosophy, as the proposed bill does. This bill completely fails to articulate any social science perspective related to ethnic studies that would inform curriculum and instruction.

CRT scholars and acolytes call for interdisciplinary perspectives but do not admit contradictory evidence. You will not find heterodox Black perspectives like those of Thomas Sowell, Glenn Loury, and Shelby Steele admitted to the analysis. In CRT, you will find conspicuous disregard for established civil rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Eldridge Cleaver, Bayard Rustin, and others in an attempt to perpetuate the kind of race essentialism that artists, intellectuals, and activists from the civil rights era attempted to make obsolete. James Baldwin would seem positively right wing in the intellectual confines of CRT whose intellectuals continue to turn the concept of color into currency. Consider Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*: after a despairing dinner with Elijah Muhammad, and simmering with the societal and personal impact of white intolerance and violence of his time, Baldwin reflected on both sides of Du Bois's color line:

America, of all the Western nations, has been best placed to prove the uselessness and obsolescence of the concept of color. But it has not dared to accept this opportunity, or even to conceive of it as an opportunity.

Leaving the compound of the Nation of Islam, Baldwin then took a taxi to join some white friends for dinner where color was far less important than other ties that bind us. CRT would turn that taxi around to re-educate Baldwin further on the lessons of Muhammad's White devil and to live within the bleak confines of race and color.

HF 3434 is not an ethnic studies bill. Rather, it is a Critical Race Theory and intersectionality bill. It is an attempt to codify a controversial set of loose theoretical race-essentialist, postmodern critiques of contemporary inter-racial relations in America. Somehow, perhaps through graduate schools of education like the one from which I earned my Ph.D., CRT and intersectionality have become conflated with teaching about racism in America, a historical fact that is as undisputed as it is important to understand. But CRT and intersectionality do not offer a framework that can be usefully applied to K-12 public education. I strongly believe this bill in so far as it advances a theoretical framework drawing from CRT and intersectionality— which, again, I cannot emphasize enough are controversial in graduate studies departments where professors attempt and fail to articulate the methodological and epistemological limitations of such theories -- would be regressive and harmful to the basic agenda of advancing interracial understanding in public school classrooms.

Perhaps the greatest harm this bill could cause would not be in its becoming law. Rather, it would be in the backlash to its becoming law. Please do not consume the people's time with this divisive concern. We do not want the Christopher Rufo machine bearing down on our capital. And, keep in mind, Democrats lose in this debate.

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Finally, I want my children and the students I teach to know, because it is fundamentally true, that race is merely skin deep. I want them to know that there is far more that brings us together than separates us. I want them to have a sense of agency and to critically examine history with all of its ugliness. I want them to consider how they might make the world better without setting that intellectual agenda for them. You should want the same. Your CRT bill would use the power of government to turn ideology and dogma into indoctrination and dictum. Please do not advance HF 3434.

Respectfully,
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