

To: Chair Jenny Samuelson and members of the VT State Board of Education
From: Amanda Garces and Mark Hage
Date: Oct 3, 2023
Re: Public comment: Rule 2000 – Inclusivity

As former co-chairs of the Act 1 Working Group, whose statutory mandate ended on August 31, 2013, we feel compelled to address the objections raised by individuals affiliated with Jewish Communities of Vermont (JCVT) in their e-mail with an attached letter to the State Board of Education on August 13, 2023.

First, we respectively want to draw your attention to the comprehensive document we provided to the State Board in 2022 explaining the reasons behind the definition of “Ethnic Group” in the EQS Manual, which was unanimously approved by the Working Group. This document, [available here](#), presents our extensive research and thinking on this matter. It is important to note that this definition underwent further modification in consultation with the State Board’s EQS Subcommittee and it, too, was endorsed without dissent by the Working Group.

With respect to the criticism levelled against Community Responsive Education (CRE), we want to emphasize that the CRE team of consultants was chosen through a thorough application process in strict conformance with the Agency of Education’s selection criteria and was conducted collectively by the Working Group. CRE’s references of educators employed in the California public school system highlighted their professionalism, expertise in Ethnic Studies, and collaborative style of engagement with teachers, administrators, students, and community members. CRE’s team worked diligently with our research and writing team, and actively engaged with the broader community of Working Group members and others on a very compressed timeline (January to July). If you require further insight from other Working Group members or the writing team about our collaboration with CRE, please let us know.

Lastly, we are perplexed by JCVT’s charge that Jewish students and families in Vermont will not be well served by the revised EQS Manual or our Standards Framework. Nothing within the revised manual or proposed Standards Framework justifies this accusation. During our deliberations, start to finish, there was a steadfast commitment to inclusivity and sensitivity to concerns raised by individual Jewish Vermonters and JCVT representatives.

Furthermore, in June, 2022, we responded comprehensively to critical and inflammatory statements made by Yoram Samets on behalf of JCVT. Our letter, which you [will find here](#), underscores the respectful and open dialogue that has always characterized our interactions with JCVT and other stakeholders, including the Anti-Defamation League. Here are excerpts from that letter:

JCVT and you were shown the utmost respect, like every other individual or organization. You attended several Working Group meetings, Mr. Samets, and often chose not to speak at them. Respectfully, you had the same opportunity to inform and shape the deliberations and thinking of the Working Group as every other member of the public. You will recall, for example, our meeting on March 17, 2022, when you, a New England representative of the Anti-Defamation League, other Vermonters who are Jewish but, to the best of our knowledge, not affiliated with JCVT, and Asma Elhuni, a member of the Working Group, exchanged opposing views on matters of interest to JCVT and others. This was a thoughtful and civil conversation, and it was facilitated to ensure that all voices, including yours, could be heard.

We also note that in a March 10th letter the Anti-Defamation League commended the Working Group for how it conducted its public proceedings. ADL said: "Our staff members have observed many of the Working Group's public meetings, and we would like to express our appreciation for your group's commitment to implementing a sound ethnic studies framework in Vermont and navigating the many comments and concerns raised by the public.

Lastly, it's important to clarify that our primary task **was to draft standards, not curriculum**. Our definitions and work more broadly were, among other concerns, for the purpose of empowering school districts to teach about and celebrate the multi-faceted richness and contributions of Vermont's many diverse communities, while facilitating a rigorous and critical examination of historical injustices and crimes against humanity, including, but not limited to, genocide, slavery, and eugenics. It's also worth calling attention to the fact that definitions in the EQS Manual already explicitly reference genocide and persecution and speak to the many criteria that define the concept of ethnicity, including religion, culture, and nationality.

Here are the definitions of "Ethnic Group," "Ethnic Studies" and "Ethnicity" in the final draft:

"Ethnic Group" means a group whose members identify with each other based on certain criteria, including a common history, ancestry or culture, religion, nationality, social or geographic origin, skin color, language, and experiences of discrimination and social exclusion, persecution, or other inhuman treatment.

"Ethnic Studies" means interdisciplinary, age-appropriate, and grade-appropriate curricula and programs dedicated to the historical and contemporary study of race, ethnicity, and indigenous peoples (including the Indigenous People of Vermont). This requires a critical examination of the experiences and perspectives of racial and ethnic groups and indigenous peoples that have suffered systemic oppression, marginalization, discrimination, persecution, and genocide within and outside the United States. "Ethnic Studies" may involve a critical examination of these experiences and perspectives through the lens of the characteristics of social identity groups.

"Ethnicity" means a concept that embodies a wide range of criteria used to identify ethnic groups, such as a common history, ancestry, or culture, national, social or geographic origin, skin color, languages, religions, tribe, or indigenous people (including the Indigenous Peoples of Vermont), or various combinations of these characteristics.

We trust that this letter, along with the documents linked to here that are in the public record, put to rest the unfounded charges and misrepresentations directed at the Working Group in JCVT's August 13th communications. However, if you require additional information or clarification, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Thank you for your work.

Sincerely,

Amanda Garces and Mark Hage
Cc: Act.1 Working Group