

August 8, 2022

Dear Tammy and Kim,

We do hope this finds you well.

In an e-mail to us dated July 25, you wrote:

We will be considering the feedback on definitions received at our June 30, 2022 [meeting]. Among those considerations is whether we need to define "critical" in the Definition section of the proposed EQS. To help inform our thinking, we have the following questions for you:

- 1. How did the working group come to use "critical" in your language?*
- 2. What did that word mean to your working group?*
- 3. Had the working group considered any synonyms for "critical," or are there any that you would recommend?*

Our apologies for the delay in responding to the questions above, but, as you know, we were both out of state until recently. In our absence, Professor Cynthia Reyes, a colleague on the Act 1 Working Group, offered compelling testimony to you on the matter this missive addresses, for which we are very grateful. Our intention here is to amplify on her remarks and offer additional clarifications.

We must begin by expressing strong agreement with her statement that the Working Group “aspired to language that would engage schools, teachers, administrators, and communities not to divide, to use this language as a steppingstone for talking about curriculum and whether/how curriculum reflects the everyday lives and histories of the children and families who attend the school district.”

Additionally, at the start of our deliberations, the Working Group accented the necessity for students to think and act “critically” in respect to their education because in Act 1 (2019), under “Duties of the Working Group,” we are authorized to make recommendations to the State Board of Education that include how to “(C) promote **critical thinking** regarding the history, contributions, and perspectives of ethnic groups and social groups”(page 7).

In general terms, thinking “critically” is how children and young adults learn best – rationally, empirically, patiently, rigorously, joyously, and sometimes frustratingly. It is how they discover, deconstruct, and demystify what they don’t understand, synthesize contributions to human knowledge from a variety of interdisciplinary sources as well as from their own lives, make informed choices after careful consideration of the facts and perspectives in play, and explore what excites, empowers, and moves them. Fundamentally, it is how students acquire the intellectual, social, cultural, and moral attributes to understand themselves, their society, and the world, and to be subjects of their own history. Observing children and young adults engage with their learning critically, and assisting them in this process in multiple ways, is one of the most exciting and gratifying experiences of teaching and mentoring.

When we use the words “critical” and “critically,” then, we are speaking of helping students acquire and cultivate the intellectual and social-emotional capacities to research, question, and probe the bases of our prevailing knowledge and understanding of humanity, of human cultures and societies, and of the non-human world and universe. To be “critical” in this sense also means not being afraid to go beyond the grain of conventional thought and belief when facts and circumstances dictate and learning to live with unresolved questions and contradictions until new knowledge and systems of inquiry open new doors of understanding.

A critical approach to learning also acknowledges and critiques the influence of political, social, economic, and cultural forces and institutions on the history, power structures, and norms of a society, and on our understanding and expressions of equality, equity, and inclusiveness; sex, gender, race, and ethnicity; cultural and social-group identities, physical and cognitive abilities, and class relations.

Respectfully, for these reasons, it did not occur to us to search for a synonym(s) for “critical.” Indeed, what other word could possibly be as strong and compelling in this context given our statutory charge and our vision of the future of education?

We hope this is helpful. Amanda and I would be happy to speak to this matter at a future meeting of your subcommittee or before the entire board.

Best,

Amanda Garces, Chairperson, Act 1 Working Group

Mark Hage, Vice Chairperson, Act 1 Working Group