

EQS Recommendations for Independent Schools: Testimony from Thetford Academy's DEI Coordinator and Alum

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“As you think about the upcoming changes to the EQS, do you have any feedback for the committee on whether or not these rules should apply to all "approved independent schools", and why that would or would not be important for Vermont students.”

Independent schools are not free from the presence of racism and the need for antiracism efforts. Historically, independent schools were created as a loophole at the end of public school segregation, to continue segregation through vouchers. Independent schools were created to provide a higher level of education and resources to caucasian students. In Virginia, when public schools ended segregation, private schools grew in communities where racism was rampant. They could continue to segregate because the changes to segregation did not regulate them as well. Looking back on history, it's important in our times today and is long overdue, to include independent schools in regulation when the changes are efforts to tackle systematic racism.

Thetford Academy, was created in 1819, by pastor Asa Burton, to be a sister school to Dartmouth College. The purpose of Thetford Academy to be a preparatory for Dartmouth, was to be a preparatory school for indigenous community members to then be ministrized and educated at Dartmouth College(Hanover, NH). Dartmouth College in 2018 removed language from a plaque on their library building, which stated the purpose of Dartmouth was to ministrize indigenous community members. (See Attached: Thetford Academy as Little Brother to Dartmouth Journal).

As an independent school, Thetford Academy is not free from anti racism work. Although we have changed a lot of our traditions and our campus has never been segregated based on gender identity, regardless there is plenty of room for improvement. I am not just the DEI coordinator for Thetford Academy, but I am also an alum (Class of '09). I am biracial, first generation Guatemalan American, and transgender. My experiences as a student and the student life on campus, has helped me relate and/or sympathize to the experiences my students may have. Without changes in our regulations, handbooks, processes, curriculums, and policies, the sense of belonging for our students and staff experience is limited. There has to be a shift in how we perform as a school systematically, through building cultural competency, cultural responsiveness, and a compassionate school culture in all corners. If we allow

independent schools to be free from EQS suggestions and regulations when it comes to antiracism, we are allowing room for racism, discrimination, and hate to exist in these independent schools. That is no different than when public schools after *Brown vs. The Board of Education* ended segregation and independent schools, due to not being similarly regulated, chose to continue segregation through school choice vouchers for white students. If independent schools are included in the regulations, this sets the expectations and a message as Vermonters, that racism has no place in our education system whether public or independent. We cannot afford to allow schools to avoid changes in regulations because of their registered status. All schools in Vermont should support their students and community members, by not being able to opt out of EQS regulations that prevent racism.

Antiracism work in independent schools does not take away or damage the education provided to white students. Antiracism work benefits all students of all races, abilities, gender identities, sexual orientations, and religious affiliations. When resolving and improving systems that are failing black and brown students, those improvements also benefit all other students. If black history is not limited to just a month of celebration or short statements, and is included throughout a curriculum, non-black students also learn to connect with others and see the value in the contributions of others, they may not identify with, in the world we have today. Many schools focus on teaching about oppression of non-white communities, but rarely do they highlight the successes and celebrate the impact of non-white community members. With regulation, guidance, and opportunities for funding to receive DEI support, students and staff can make the shifts as a community to create a better sense of belonging and a greater cultural competence.

I support and see the successes and benefits of having a DEI coordinator and the changes we have made at Thetford Academy. Our students interact with students of non-independent schools often in sports, theater, and other community activities. The anti racism efforts go home with our students and also into the communities they engage with. Which creates more inclusive and welcoming communities in our region. Our school has made a commitment to antiracism and our students are elevated to being more culturally competent, with the help of a DEI coordinator and Student Alliance for Racial Justice. Educators have the opportunity to meet with the DEI coordinator to go over any curriculum changes, questions, and ideas. Educators also have regular training on how to facilitate difficult conversations around race. We installed a restorative justice peer review panel, where students can help decide what ways a student who has harmed their community can improve and repair their relationships. There are a lot of changes schools can make to make the educational space more equitable, inclusive, diverse, and welcoming, but independent schools should not be

free from those expectations in education. We cannot repeat history, by excluding independent schools from antiracism regulations, and having the regulations state-wide regardless of school status. Otherwise we will have those schools who opt-out, where racism is not addressed and the opportunity gap is expanded. This affects our communities and surrounding communities. Racism has no place in our education system in Vermont, whether independent or public. Our students deserve to receive the same quality education as all other students, regardless of the color of their skin. To do so, we must address racism, install regulations, and listen to the suggestions from students in Vermont who feel/experience racism in their everyday lives.

Thank you,

Tony Strat-Cortez

Sources:

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