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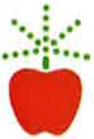
House Education Subcommittee on Special Education
February 10, 2022

Testimony of Tanya Contos, Curriculum and Instruction Coordinator
Pennsylvania Distance Learning Charter School

Good morning and thank you to the Honorable members of the House Education Subcommittee on Special Education for inviting me to testify before you today.

My name is Tanya Contos, and I am the Curriculum and Instruction Coordinator at Pennsylvania Distance Learning Charter School (PA Distance Learning), a public cyber charter school. I am a Pennsylvania certified Supervisor of Curriculum and an experienced Social Studies and English Language Arts teacher. Thank you for the opportunity to share reflections regarding the proposed bill (HB 726) to mandate the inclusion of the political, economic, and social contributions of disabled individuals in Pennsylvania's K-12 curriculum. My testimony will outline what culturally responsive education and inclusive practices we are currently using at PA Distance Learning, what our process is for creating and implementing new curriculum in our school, the current academic standards and how they can be leveraged, and some additional thoughts/feedback to consider for HB 726.

Currently, at PA Distance Learning, we serve 1,409 students across the Commonwealth. Of those students, 316 students, 22.4%, receive special education services. Because we service students across Pennsylvania with varying backgrounds and needs, we have been proactive in our approach to provide inclusive opportunities for all of our students. One way we ensure this for our students is through Professional Development for our staff. Every one of our staff members receives training in anti-bias education and culturally responsive teaching practices. This training occurs during a staff member's first year in their induction process. We also have continued professional learning in Professional Learning Communities that examine



inclusive practices and culturally responsive pedagogy to ensure we are implementing best practices for our students and families.

Culturally Responsive Education and Inclusive Practices

Culturally responsive education is a research-based approach to teaching. There are various components to this practice, but one of them is maintaining an inclusive curriculum that is respectful of differences. There is an intersection in culturally responsive teaching with inclusive practices and it is essential for the disabled community. My favorite analogy to explain this practice, simply, is windows and mirrors.

A “window opportunity” allows students to learn about those who are different than themselves and offers a view into their experience. These windows allow students to develop an understanding about the wider world. When you use this practice in the classroom, all students get to experience exposure to differences whether it be culture, religion, lifestyle, disability, or skin color.

A “mirror opportunity” allow students to see themselves. This is an empowering experience because students can see a reflection of who they are. They often provide a parallel experience where a student can examine themselves or a part of themselves in others. This practice is extremely powerful in literature experiences and storytelling. Students with and without disabilities should receive these instructional opportunities. This practice helps build empathy, resilience, and inclusivity for our students.

As outlined in the memorandum for HB 726, the goal of this proposal is for students to feel safe and supported in their learning environment. This is accomplished organically when these teaching methods are deployed in the classroom. Window and mirror opportunities lead students to examine ideas about differences critically through experiences of others like them



and not like them. When teaching about influential contributors to society, students are able to see that despite their disabilities, barriers, or challenges these individuals were able to make a positive impact. I would like to highlight that this instruction is built into any quality curriculum and instruction that is delivered by schools.

Curriculum Creation and Adoption Processes

In my role as the Curriculum and Instruction Coordinator at PA Distance Learning, I lead our process in creating criteria for materials selection during curriculum review and adoption. The criteria is based on meeting the state academic standards, an analysis of student data, stakeholder feedback, state and federal laws, research-based practices, and our school's mission and vision. At PA Distance Learning, we also utilize the indicators of high-quality instructional materials. These indicators support culturally responsive and inclusive education in that they look for specific evidence in curriculum materials that connect instruction to the lived and historical experiences of students. This is step one in the lengthy review and adoption process. The next steps are to review potential materials against the criteria, attend demos, pilot the materials, analyze data, select the materials, receive training on the materials, design a scope and sequence for instruction, map the scope and sequence to ensure it meets the required state standards, and finally design the instruction to be delivered to students. **This process takes two full years from research to complete design.**

A point of clarity that is needed in HB 726 is whether this going to be a prescribed curriculum that is already built for schools by the advisory committee or learning targets and standards created for schools to meet. We currently do not have a prescribed curriculum that the state provides. The state provides approved standards for us to meet in the curriculum that we design and materials we choose. If it is the advisory committee is only providing schools with

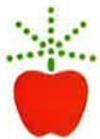


learning targets and standards, then the burden on schools in the pilot is going to be much greater, and the timeline will need to be extended (moved to the 2023-24 school year). Also, financial support may be required for schools to complete this work. Please consider the timeline outlined above when provided with standards to meet.

Current Standards

There are currently six standards sets in the area of the Social Studies adopted by the Pennsylvania State Board of Education. These include the Academic Standards for History, Academic Standards for Economics, Academic Standards for Civics and Government, and Academic Standards for Geography. These standards took effect on January 11, 2003. We also have the Pennsylvania Core Standards for Reading in History and Social Studies, and Pennsylvania Core Standards for Writing in History and Social Studies, which took effect on March 1, 2014. Our four sets of academic standards for the basis of our Social Studies instruction are over nineteen years old.

Various surrounding states have updated their standards in the past few years to encompass the inquiry-based learning model, *The C3 Framework*, which ties together College, Career, and Civic Life. This model's inspiration was based on the fact that children and adolescents are naturally curious about the complex, multifaceted world they live in and how to navigate it. As well, this model is centered on student civic life. Culturally responsive practices fit well within this framework as it emphasizes questioning and inquiry to allow diverse students to take ownership of learning and have the opportunity to evaluate sources from multiple perspectives; furthermore, it challenges the status-quo stories and dominant narratives present in today's society. It also involves projects of informed action in one's community and culture.



House Bill 726 lead me to question whether we need a curriculum pilot program to provide instruction to students on the contributions of individuals with disabilities, or if we need something more extensive like revisiting our nineteen-year-old standards to adopt a more inclusive standards framework encompassing culturally responsive education.

A great example lies in our current History standards. Within area 8.3 – United States History, the Grade 9 standard is written, “identify and analyze the political and cultural contributions of individuals and groups to United States history from 1787-1914” (image below). One of the innovators listed is Alexander Graham Bell. Alexander Graham Bell is thought to have been dyslexic, and he also had a mom and wife who were both deaf. If we use a framework of inquiry that asked students what motivated Alexander Graham Bell to invent the telephone (instead of having them identify that he invented it and the year) students would recognize through their learning journey that despite his disability and despite the communication challenges that his family had, he was able to understand advanced and alternative means of communication.

There are various individuals listed within the examples in this area who had a disability. As a former early American History teacher and English Language Arts teacher, I provided instruction on Harriet Tubman’s heroism and accomplishments despite her disability and challenges. **It was not spelled out for me in a curriculum to do so, but it was my knowledge of practice that led me to deliver it in that way.** In addition to examining and updating PA’s academic standards it is essential that educators receive professional development in the practice of Culturally Responsive Teaching and Inclusive Practices, and our teacher preparation programs include this training as well.



Thoughts/Feedback on House Bill 726

The following are additional considerations for House Bill 726.

Participation:

- The schools piloting this curriculum and how they will be chosen (for instance, there are only a few regional charter schools, so it may be difficult to require their participation).
- The incentives for schools to participate.
- The financial support needed for participants.
- The communication that would need to go to parents/families about this new curriculum.

Curriculum Development:

- The discipline or disciplines affected by this curriculum.
- The grades that this curriculum will be covering.
- The time needed for the creation of this curriculum, either by the advisory committee or each individual school, and how that impacts the implementation timeline.
- The frequency that the advisory committee would need to reconvene to update the curriculum or standards (if the schools are developing their own curriculum).

Measurement and Evaluation:

- The success criteria that will be considered to determine effectiveness.
- How and where the data will be reported.

Summary

I would like to express support, on behalf of PA Distance Learning, for the disability inclusive curriculum/instruction outlined in HB 726 and the goal of this legislation. In summary, I would like to outline a few key thoughts:



- Professional development on culturally responsive teaching can affect practice and teacher efficacy in instruction for diverse learners, and this should be required of all educators.
- Time spent revisiting the current state standard areas that highlight individuals and their contributions with an updated framework could have a more overarching impact.
- The timeline for implementation of the curriculum should be considered.
- Clarity is needed on whether this will be a prescribed, created curriculum for schools or if there will be standards that have to be met and schools will design the curriculum.
- Consideration should be given to the financial cost to schools depending on what is being asked of them, the goals of the curriculum and how the program will be evaluated.

Thank you to the Subcommittee for allowing me to discuss a topic that I am passionate about. Thank you to Rep. Ortitay for sponsoring this legislation. I appreciate the work of our leaders in wanting to create a more inclusive community for our students. I am happy to answer any questions that you have.