

July 28, 2021

Dear Dr. Buck,

My name is Tami Rubino and, as you may recall from prior correspondence, I'm blessed to be the mom of three amazing Waukee students. My oldest graduated in 2020. Starting this fall, I'll have a junior at NWHS and a 7th grader at WMS.

Before I begin, let me take moment to say thank you for your service and dedication to the teachers, parents and students in our growing community. In the hustle and bustle of life, it's easy to overlook the sacrifices you and the school board members have made serving our community over the years. I can't express how grateful we are to be part of a district that worked so incredibly hard last year to keep in-person learning available for our students. It meant more to us (and our kids) than you'll ever know. So if you only take away one thing from this letter, please let it be my deepest respect and appreciation for all you do.

Now onto to the important topic at hand...

There are no words to describe the heaviness I felt after watching the replay of the school board meeting on Monday night. As a proud parent of Waukee students, I sit here now contemplating if it's still the best place for my kids. I am also kicking myself for being so complacent over the past 13 years, blindly putting my trust in the institutional processes. I'm embarrassed to admit this – I assumed communities like Waukee were slightly immune or sheltered from the civil upheavals happening in other parts of our country. I now recognize how naïve that makes me sound, but it's never too late to get involved, seek to understand and voice my concerns. It's never too late when it comes to our kids. Thus, I hope you'll bear with me through the entirety of this letter.

The most discouraging aspect of Monday night's meeting was the irony of the #givelove campaign in contrast to how some of the board members and attendees reacted to the conversation. If the tone and temperament of that meeting is an example of how equity standards are intended to foster inclusion and diversity in our community, I fear we have already failed.

At one point during the meeting, Wendy Liske asked "where are they," referring to people who have recently raised concerns about the equity standards posted on the WCSD website. Like most people, we've been right here – working 60 hours a week and trying our best to raise our children and keep them safe. I am very disappointed to be stereotyped by Wendy as someone who is "hijacking the process" simply because I have questions on this extremely important topic – a topic I did not realize was even being discussed at Waukee until this week. How were parents supposed to find out or get involved? Out of the 600+ letters and emails I received from WCSD over the last 18 months, guess how many mentioned anything about equity standards? Is it really just Dave or Dan's personal responsibility to track down all of the "conservatives" in the community as Wendy suggested? Or isn't it the responsibility of all school board members to engage, listen and invite diverse perspectives into healthy, collaborative discussions - especially on topics as important as this one? I don't believe Wendy intended to disparage so many parents like me in the WCSD, but that is most definitely how it came across.

Dr. Buck, you and Lori Lyon both asked “what’s wrong with these standards?” Well, I’m going to attempt to answer that question without writing an entire novel, but I do have a lot to say. Thank you, in advance, for hearing me out.

Concern #1

I was deeply disturbed to learn the Waukee Equity Standards were copied from the SPLC. Revised or not, the idea of using a group like the SPLC as a reference point for any school policy raises serious questions about the real intent of these standards. Why start out with any linkage or association to such a divisive and contentious group? Copying their policy verbatim looks like an endorsement of their political agenda. Google Atty Kristen Waggoner’s article in the WSJ, and you’ll see clearly why the SPLC has no business writing standards of behavior for anyone. In my opinion, it’s a black eye for our community. How can we ever feel good about the #givelove campaign knowing it prefaces words from a group with a “HATE MAP” on their website (<https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map>)? Can you please help me understand how a document that originated from an organization like SPLC became the roadmap for such an important school policy? I’m really struggling to understand why these equity standards aren’t taken down from the Waukee website immediately.

Concern #2

It is only because of HF 802 that many parents are slowly becoming aware these equity standards even exist. And despite the removal of specific words and phrases per HF 802, the underlying agenda of social justice is clear. It is undeniable when the main header on the Waukee Equity & Inclusion webpage prominently leads with the word “intersectionality.” Does everyone on the board, teachers, parents and students even know what that word means? Efforts designed to eliminate the “systemic discrimination and disadvantage of intersectionality” have created more division and exclusion than this world has ever known. What is the basis for this claim, you might ask? Let me offer just a few examples since the equity standards have been in place at Waukee Schools:

- A WHS teacher told a student to “sit down, shut up and stop exercising his white privilege,” when he asked a question about Black History Month
- A Waukee coach called out a student for not his wearing his mask properly, but made it personal by adding “we all know where you stand based on what your dad posts on Facebook.”
- A WMS teacher ripped one presidential candidate’s sticker off a student’s iPad while other classmates continued to display their candidate’s sticker
- A WHS teacher posted a selfie calling our Governor an extremely foul and inappropriate name – with hand gestures included – that was shared all over social media
- Waukee elementary students were told by their teacher that cops kill black people
- A WHS student – who happens to be white - made a really dumb mistake that was caught on tape, eliciting multiple death threats and suggestions to “off himself”
- A Waukee teacher felt it was appropriate to read a book to elementary students about discussing “gender misidentification” with their parents

Concern #3

I am curious if there’s been any real discussion about how these equity standards are applied, for example, to a 12-year-old boy who openly identifies himself based on his religion and political affiliation,

but happens to have light skin? I can tell you how they are applied based on my firsthand experience. You can ask this boy yourself how “safe” he felt at school - even when he could respectfully and articulately explain his position. He’ll tell you his beliefs were challenged and belittled so vigorously by both students and teachers that his sense of self-worth and belonging crumbled. He began having such severe anxiety attacks at school he had to finish the second half of his 6th grade year homeschooling. So if we’re going to develop protocols around tough topics like equity, fairness and inclusion, can we please make sure they’re applied – without bias – to all students.

Concern #4

The identity standard on the Waukee website states, *“Students will develop positive social identities based on their membership in multiple groups in society.”* With all due respect, developing a positive social identity and determining what groups my child belongs to does not fall under the jurisdiction of public educators. I’m a firm believer in individual sovereignty – in other words, every human being is uniquely and wonderfully created on purpose, for a purpose. However, part of life’s amazing journey is discovery, exploration and evolution of that purpose over time. Consider toddlers and teenagers as an example. Ask any 3-year-old who missed their afternoon nap if they care what anyone else wants or needs at that moment. Ask a teenager to put aside their cell phone for an afternoon to pull weeds in the garden. Self-absorbed toddlers and teenagers can easily identify with groups based solely on raw emotion or just the fear of missing out. Who they are now is not likely who they will be as adults. These painfully awkward stages in development happen organically and cannot be controlled by standards written on a website. A person’s identity is much deeper and more complex than the groups they align to or how those groups intersect. Identity is formed through self-awareness, family values, the trials and tribulations of life, and by the interpersonal lessons learned on the playground and in the boardroom. I vividly remember my identity being shaped as a child when I tried to force everyone to play Red Rover one too many times. Identity is a delicate balance of how you see yourself versus how the world sees you, which – let’s be honest – is impossible to master as an adult – let alone as a child. Each unique self-reflection and social encounter is what forms our identity, which cannot be fabricated, replicated or prescribed. As a parent, I am not comfortable with my children exploring their “multiple identities” at school without my involvement and guidance. There’s too much at stake. And I certainly do not want my children believing they can impose the will and desires of their easily-influenced, ever-changing identities on the people around them. I am – and will always be – the ultimate accountability partner and champion for my children during their formative years – not WCSO.

Concern #5

One of the diversity standards states, *“I can explain how the way groups of people are treated today, and the way they have been treated in the past shapes their group identity and culture.”* This standard is both rocky and slippery based on one’s personal interpretation and perspectives. To be blunt, I do not want my children being taught that our nation was founded by white supremist through racism and oppression. I do not want them to be shamed for or ashamed of their heritage. While I respect and accept alternate points of view on this topic, it is not what we teach in our home. We do not believe the atrocities and failures of past generations should take center stage in the founding story of this great country. If that is truly how history will be written, can you imagine the indictments on our generation another 150 years from now? Putting so much emphasis and blame on past mistakes is like issuing a zero-tolerance policy on imperfections, failures and screw ups to our kids. Do one bad thing, Little Johnny, and it will permanently erase every good and decent thing you’ve ever done. There’s no coming

back, no redemption or forgiveness if you mess up. Can you imagine being saddled with kind of fear at age 12?

Concern #6

One of the justice standards reads, *“I can explain the short and long-term impact of certain words, behaviors, unjust practices and laws that act to limit the rights and freedoms of identity groups.”* First, the word justice (like many other words in the equity standards) can never really be defined in absolute terms. So it irks me this is a standard set forth for our kids to try and live up to. In other words, what I perceive as unjust might seem like no big deal to you. So how are kids expected to universally identify every instance of an injustice that occurs? Second, I’d like to understand how “identity groups” are defined and formed? Is there a list? Are there any guidelines? How will people who self-identify under false pretenses be identified and handled? And please help me understand how children can be expected to “explain the long term impacts of all the injustices in the world.” No one can predict the long term impacts of anything that goes on in society today – the founding fathers certainly had no clue that terms like privilege and racist would someday become synonymous, which makes this standard completely unachievable.

To go one step further on the topic of injustice, I have my own personal and painful story to tell. To this day, I still struggle with the long term impacts of my childhood injustices. What I do know without question – at some point in early adulthood I made the conscious decision that injustice would not be the headline of my story. My scars will never heal, and restitution can never be paid. That does NOT, however, give me the right to punish people who grew up with childhood experiences that I perceive as better or easier than mine, nor to marginalize someone else’s pain. I will fiercely and unapologetically teach my kids that their circumstances do not define them. I will always hold them accountable for defining their own circumstances. I mean, who ultimately decides how one person’s injustice stacks up against another? Call me simple, but teaching kids how to deal with injustice is as simple as teaching them to be compassionate – to acknowledge when someone else is suffering and offer their help. And compassion is a word that needs no further definition – it can be modeled, measured and taught in schools without question or controversy. This alone would make WCSD a far better place for our kids.

Concern #7

The action standard states, *“I will plan and carry out action against injustice in the world. I will join with peers, family, and community members to plan and carry out action against exclusion, prejudice, and discrimination. We will be thoughtful and creative in our actions in order to achieve our goals.”* This standard is so lofty and superfluous it does nothing but set our kids up for failure. It also sounds like a call for organized activism, which – as a parent – makes me very uncomfortable since I’m unclear what the goal is or if it’s even achievable. Besides, not every student has the desire or gift for advocacy, so this standard seems to be in direct conflict with “individuality” in the identity standard. How will this paradox be addressed? Most adults don’t have the capacity or wherewithal to “plan and carry out action against injustice in the world,” so putting this kind of pressure on school-agers is ridiculous and irresponsible. Let’s bring it down to earth and start with a goal of saying or doing something kind for someone else each and every day.

Summary (yes, I promise you're getting close to the end....)

The fundamental question that had me wide awake at 4:30 am this morning is ...in all honesty, I don't understand what we are *really* trying to accomplish with this? If we're truly want to do what's best for everyone in our community – especially our students, why are we going down a path chock full of legal and political landmines? Waukee parents, teachers, students and administrators have an opportunity to do better. We can show everyone how easy it is to set policies and standards that aren't confusing and controversial. Instead of following a trend that could potentially divide our community and expose the district to a wave of costly litigation, we can step up as leaders to establish standards that everyone can understand and support – standards like love, kindness, respect and gratitude, which have no hidden agenda or meaning.

I'll wrap this up with one final story...

Last week, our family was devastated by a tragic accident that killed the father of five children and one of his sons. In the hours and days following this horrific tragedy, we witnessed so many blessings that filled our broken hearts with love and hope. Entire communities of people – of all colors, shapes and sizes – showed up in support of a grieving mother and her 4 remaining children. At the funeral, an elementary teacher shared beautiful, heartfelt stories about her former student that filled the room with both joy and tears. We saw our enormous extended family drawn apart by differences, distance and time, come together in solidarity to support each other and mourn the loss of our loved ones. Aren't these the types of standards we should be teaching our children and demonstrating as adults? It shouldn't take tragedies to wake us up and make us realize how fortunate we are – or make us understand importance of love, generosity and respect. Life is not fair or equitable in so many ways that are completely outside our control. Injustices will never be abolished. We shouldn't set the expectation that we can control when or if terrible things will happen – we can only control what we do about it, like do everything in our power to prevent it from happening again. This issue is far too important to expect arbitrary standards posted on a website to have any real impact on how our kids treat one another. We all know that is not the reality of the world we live in today. Kindness and compassion are the only real tools we have to recover and heal our brokenness. And it starts with us, not our students.

Thank you for taking the time to read this Dr. Buck. You can count on me and several other concerned parents to be at the next school board meeting. Hopefully it's not too late to effect change that will benefit and bring peace to everyone in the Waukee community.

With respect,

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