

Wednesday, January 10th, 2024

Grants Pass School Board strips 'racism' from policy on discrimination

By Chris Bristol of the Daily Courier

The Grants Pass School Board on Tuesday repealed a 2021 anti-discrimination resolution and replaced it with a new one that removes any overt references to racism.

The old "Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion" resolution was adopted in the aftermath of unrest nationwide over the murder of George Floyd and referenced race and racial discrimination at least 20 times.

"As school board members, we are committed to actively interrupting systemic racism and eliminating inequities in our education system," it read.

The new "Cultivating Inclusion and Individual Empowerment" resolution explicitly repealed the old one in favor of language that "emphatically condemns intolerance, group judgmentalism, and discrimination."

"Providing students with a comprehensive and truthful understanding of our society's history, including its challenges and triumphs, nurtures resilience, optimism, and informed citizenship," it states.

The new resolution was sponsored by board members Nathan Seable and Gary Richardson. It passed unanimously, 7-0.

Seable is part of a group of four new board members who were promoted by the Josephine County Republican Party as parental rights conservatives last May. Their election was part of a broader trend rooted in culture wars pushing for parental control in schools and against critical race theory.

Richardson, meanwhile, has been a member of the school board since 2005 and voted for the old resolution in 2021. That vote, like Tuesday's vote, also was unanimous and featured two other current members of the board, Debbie Brownell and current board chair Cassie Wilkins.

The vote to repeal and replace was made without comment by any members of the board.

Just prior to the vote, community member Indra Nicholas, a member of the Rogue Community College board of education, spoke in favor of the repeal.

She said she was "appalled" by the original resolution in 2021, which she described as "group labeling" in a way that was "divisive" and "destructive."

She went on to say that while she does not consider herself "great at history," it is nonetheless "important we tackle the good and the bad."

"We're all one, united," she added.

The inclusion resolution is more of a statement of purpose by the board and does not replace the district's 2019 "All Students Belong" policy. Unlike the old resolution, the new one was not offered in a Spanish-language version.

The original anti-discrimination resolution was adopted not only during a period of unrest nationwide after the George Floyd murder but also during a period of diversity-related controversies locally that saw District 7 settle a pair of discrimination lawsuits for a total of \$425,000. The lawsuits were filed by two campus monitors at Grants Pass High School who accused administrators of tolerating racial harassment by a fellow monitor and then retaliating against them when they reported it.

Meanwhile, an internal investigation by the district's lawyers while the litigation was pending concluded the district had a "deficiency in cultural awareness and sensitivity" and that the district couldn't verify that all complaints of harassment were being adequately investigated.

The internal investigation was sparked in part by an ill-fated prank by the senior class in 2019 that included tortillas being spread around the classroom of a Spanish language teacher.

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