

**SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
CHAIR – REP. KRISTEY WILLIAMS
TESTIMONY ON CRITICAL RACE THEORY IN CLASSROOMS**

Chairman Williams and Committee:

Thank you for having me here today to discuss whether critical race theory (CRT) is being used in Kansas classrooms. First, I remind the Committee that the State Board of Education took an official position on this issue in its July 14, 2021, statement (attached). Therefore, I appear today as an individual board member and not representing a new State Board position on CRT.

Critical race theory (CRT) is an advanced and complex framework of analysis with roots extending back to the 1970s, used to examine how racism is inherent in the law and legal institutions. It is used largely in graduate-level settings and law schools.

The role of the State Board is to set curricular standards and oversee state assessments. CRT is not found in Kansas state curricular standards and the State Board has no intention to include it. Students are not assessed on CRT. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude that CRT is influencing student achievement.

The problem before us is that the term “CRT” has been co-opted to be an umbrella term for anything someone wants to complain about in public schools. That by no means implies we should dismiss parents’ concerns about schools and curriculum. Parents are right to take any curricular disputes to their local school boards for resolution. But it’s time to use accurate terms and talk about what is really being encouraged in schools.

The State Board promotes improvement in student achievement through our Kansas Education Systems Accreditation (KESA) process, supported policies, and our academic standards and assessments. Here are some examples.

1. Foundational Structures: The KESA accreditation process includes eight Foundational Structures that schools must address. You can find those structures here at our KSDE website: [Kansas Education Systems Accreditation Foundational Structures \(ksde.org\)](https://ksde.org/foundational-structures) (See attached) The first Foundational Structure is Tiered Framework of Support. I bring this to your attention, because it is important for the committee to understand that our first priority is student learning. The Chair once asked why “academics” was not on our list of legislative priorities. The answer is because academics is our everyday priority. We, our staff, and our public schools work on academics every day. You will also find

attached the rubric we use to determine where schools are in making sure every student succeeds academically. Here is a link to the rubric:

[Foundational Structure Reflection Rubric - Tiered Framework/System of Supports \(ksde.org\)](https://ksde.org/foundational-structure-reflection-rubric-tiered-framework/system-of-supports)

There have been times when the Legislature and the State Board have successfully worked together to improve academic success. Dyslexia and reading improvement are areas that comes to mind. The Legislative Task Force on Dyslexia included Sen. Ty Masterson, Sen. Bruce Givens, and Rep. Brenda Dietrich. The Task Force made recommendations that have led to our public schools moving to structured literacy curricula to address dyslexia and reading issues. We now require more and earlier screenings to identify reading/dyslexia problems. And just this year, the State Board devoted \$15 million to train teachers and professors in schools of education on structured literacy. Even though there was pressure to put off implementing these changes in the middle of a pandemic, the State Board pushed districts forward. We knew that improving reading was too important to put off even one more year. An information sheet with the Dyslexia recommendations is attached.

2. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Another of our Foundational Structures is Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). The best learning will not happen unless students are in a safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment. You can find the rubric for DEI here: [Foundational Structure Reflection Rubric - Diversity, Equity and Inclusion \(ksde.org\)](https://ksde.org/foundational-structure-reflection-rubric-diversity-equity-and-inclusion) , and a copy is attached. I have attended DEI training and participate regularly in one district's Equity Council. I have visited with administrators and board members about their DEI training and equity work. I have visited dozens of schools. In all my visits, there has never been any mention of anything other than common sense, practical approaches to DEI to make sure every student feels included. DEI work around the state is focused on helping students learn, first and foremost. Disputes about DEI curriculum are best handled locally, as what is needed in each district is not a "one-size fits all".
3. Physical and Mental Health: Since we recognize the importance of good mental and physical health to student achievement, that is also a Foundational Structure. The rubric for Physical and Mental Health is attached and here is a link to the site: [Foundational Structure Reflection Rubric - Physical and Mental Health \(ksde.org\)](https://ksde.org/foundational-structure-reflection-rubric-physical-and-mental-health)

We appreciate that the Legislature took a particular interest in student suicide. That is, of course, an interest of ours as well. To that end, we developed a resource for schools: the Kansas Suicide Prevention, Response and Postvention Toolkit. I have provided each committee member a copy. We are also appreciative of the Legislature's investment in student mental health with the Mental Health Pilot that has shown to be so successful in helping schools deal with student mental health issues.

4. History: The Kansas standards for History, Government, and Social Studies (HGSS) were updated in 2020. You can find a copy of them here: [Report Template \(ksde.org\)](https://ksde.org/report-template) Our standards are designed to help students become informed, thoughtful, and engaged.

We have a particular emphasis on civic engagement, which is also a separate Foundational Structure. We are emphasizing real world learning so students will understand and remember history. We want them to be able to use higher order thinking and communicate their own positions on issues. That is one reason we also rejected the former assessment in favor of a classroom-based assessment, where students are asked to put forward a thesis and use argument and evidence to defend it. If you want to learn more about the HGSS curricular standards and assessments, go here: [History, Government, and Social Studies \(HGSS\) \(ksde.org\)](https://ksde.org/history-government-and-social-studies-hgss/) Note that local school districts choose the curriculum they want to teach the standards.

History teaching is also an area where the State Board worked successfully with legislators. Rep. Valdenia Winn and Rep. John Alcala once introduced a bill to require culturally relevant pedagogy in Kansas public schools. Rather than take the legislative approach, the State Board supported and encouraged the Representatives' efforts to "train the teacher" with a program that was co-hosted by Washburn University. To that end, our HGSS standards include this statement: "Culture is central to learning. It plays a role not only in communicating and receiving information, but also in shaping the thinking process of groups and individuals. Instructional designs that acknowledge, respond to, and celebrate fundamental cultures offer a full and equitable access to education for students from all cultures. Culturally Relevant Teaching is a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural and experiential references in all aspects of learning."

5. Social/Emotional Growth: As described on our website: "Social-Emotional Growth (SEG) is a high priority for Kansans. In the Kansas Can Vision for Education, SEG is one of the five measured outcomes set forth by the Kansas State Board of Education. Skills encompassed in SEG include intrapersonal and interpersonal abilities, such as self-awareness, social awareness, problem solving, and decision making. These are skills that can be taught, and they are foundational to student success in school and life. It is important for schools to measure the social-emotional development of students just as academic development is measured. These measures can inform instructional practice, moving social and emotional learning from a singular endeavor to an integrated part of daily instruction." A fact sheet on SEG is attached.

Why do we ask schools to get involved in students' social-emotional growth? Because Kansans asked us to! Parents, teachers, community members, and business leaders all agreed that social-emotional growth was even more important to student success in life than academics. To that end, each district must determine what their students need, and demonstrate that they are delivering it. From community input, we also developed a Competency Wheel so schools would know the skills Kansans wanted us to focus on. See attached and here is a link to it: [cccwheel-051917.pdf \(cccframework.org\)](https://cccframework.org/cccwheel-051917.pdf) . There has been some misguided, I believe, notion that working on these skills is irrelevant to public education. That we should just get "back to basics". I believe social and emotional growth is foundational to student achievement.

In conclusion, I agree with Shayla Griffin, who said that working on diversity, inclusion, and equity and teaching accurate history includes some hard things about our past and present; and learning about racism is one of those hard things. But learning about racism is not CRT. I think our students are smart enough to handle tough topics. Learning to think critically about hard things is part of being an educated person.

We should work together to end the CRT dispute. We should celebrate and encourage the good work schools are doing in the areas I mentioned. If parents are concerned with what a district is doing, they can have that discussion locally and make changes as needed.

I would be glad to stand for questions.

Ann E. Mah
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District 4