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To Chairwoman Landwehr and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to share findings and thoughts related to increased anxiety and depression in our youth today.

I'll offer an important question: *Are feelings of shame, depression, and anxiety infiltrating our schools in unanticipated ways?*

To answer that question, and to stretch our personal perspectives, let's consider where feelings of shame, depression, and anxiety might originate.

We could explain away the increases in negative emotions, including suicidal ideations, by concluding that children are walking into our schools having already adopted a culturally influenced burden of shame, anxiety, and depression. We could also blame unstable and changing family dynamics. Or, we could simply say we're losing our humanity in this new technological age. Or, further, we could associate increased anxiety and depression with an uptick in social media dependence, less personal interactions and less respect in all facets of society, and certainly more violent and dark themes produced by Netflix and other entertainment franchises and outlets.

All of those may be adding to the mental health burden of our youth; however, have you ever stopped to wonder what is happening inside our classrooms that may also be negatively impacting our children? It may be more obvious than you realized.

Let's take a look at the concept of shame. An article published within the *Scientific American* in 2019, says that "Shame makes us direct our focus inward and view our entire self in a negative light." It also adds that "women are quicker to feel humiliated than men, and adolescents feel shame more intensely than adults do. As a result, women and adolescents are more susceptible to the negative effects of shame, such as low self-esteem and depression."

The article further shares a study from George Mason University that cites shame-proneness and its connectivity to low self-esteem and depression. The depression and shame link was "examined in 108 studies involving more than 22,000 subjects which showed a clear connection."

But, pressing further, how does this relate to our classrooms?

Dr. Gary Thompson, clinical and forensic psychologist, shared the following commentary: "Imagine being age 11 and, whether directly or whether implied, are told hey, your mom, your dad are systemically broken. Your grandma or great or great-great grandma were slave owners... because of that I can't get a job..." Would those words cause children to feel undeserved shame and guilt?

The above scenario offered by Dr. Thompson brings us to a growing trend in the United States often referred to as Critical Race Theory. The theory is based in the concept that there are two classes of people and those classes are based on the color of one's skin (note: not the content of one's character): the oppressor class and the oppressed class. The subtleness, and sometimes directness, of Critical Race Theory (CRT) is very real and can start as innocently as referring to "angry white mobs" instead of focusing on what can be changed – one's behavior (angry) versus what cannot be changed – your race. Are children internalizing these messages and thus labeling themselves as bad?

A lawsuit on this topic was filed by a middle school drama teacher (Evanston/Skokie School District 65) for practices of discrimination. The teacher's contention was that the district was violating federal law by "conditioning individuals to see each other's skin color first and foremost, then pitting different racial groups against each other." Further, the teacher provided examples such as the following from a children's book: "Racism is a white person's problem and we are all caught up in it."

What impact would these words have on young children who have never had a racist thought in their hearts? Children who see their peers as they see themselves – equal? According to a Harvard study, when a person feels shame and guilt and internalizes this guilt, they are exposed to higher levels of PTSD symptoms. There's no doubt reading that "you" are racist will have a depressing impact on the sweetest and most innocent of souls.

Let's take a look at reported instances that occurred in Kansas schools and consider how these practices could negatively impact our children and their views of themselves:

- Former Hiawatha teacher Stuart Aller told the Board of Education that the tenets of critical race theory were indeed part of the culture under the guise of the district's Diversity and Inclusion Council. Aller said, "I'm concerned that this (Diversity) council ... is an indoctrination and discrimination tool," Aller said. "We received staff and student training that places blame for societal problems on those having white skin color."
- Aller said; there was a culture that expressed the concepts of CRT among teachers. "During lunch breaks in the teacher workroom, I routinely heard remarks about whiteness, white fragility, privilege, these buzz terms that critical race theory uses and it's concerning," Aller told the board. "It doesn't provide for a welcoming or inclusive environment at all. It makes, actually, for a hostile and uncomfortable environment for those trying to live a humble and quiet life."
- The Shawnee Mission school district says it doesn't use critical race theory, but the *Sentinel* investigation found that the district spent more \$400,000 on Corwin's [Deep Equity training](#), which is based on [critical race theory](#). Corwin says its Deep Equity program is based on the work of [Gary Howard](#), who believes White people "[are](#)

collectively bound and unavoidably complicit in the arrangements of dominance that have systematically favored our racial group over others."

- A student who had been through the school training tells the interviewer in the video, "I never really knew about social justice. But today they gave me a definition that will stick with me for a lifetime. The good of many rather than the greed of a few." Throughout the training, participants are reminded that "whiteness" is a bad thing. Howard reflects on what it means "to be white in a country with such a difficult history on race, and my (white) group has been the dominant, oppressive group in many ways."
- Participants play a game called Culture Toss. People are required to give up elements of their "identity," two at a time, to survive in an oppressive police state where people are "disappeared." This is equated with being a "marginalized" student in the dominant culture – kids must give up elements of their true selves to conform to a culture of "whiteness."
- Facilitators are given strategies to shut down criticism, which Howard says most often comes from "white, male, social studies types and conservative Christians...." Howard also refers to them as "negative people."
- In Olathe, a parent reports that the link to the "Learning for Justice," classroom "resources" page labeled "lessons," are statements such as "For white children in particular, these stories offer a way of balancing the negative role that white people have played in maintaining a system of racism with concrete stories about people who have worked and continue to work to dismantle that system," suggesting that all white people are racist, and includes lessons on "diversity" for children as young as kindergarten.
- USD 259: the district website has examples found on its [resource page](#) such as the Zinn Education Project. The [Washington Examiner](#) says Zinn's founder, Howard Zinn, is "a Marxist historian who served as a foot soldier in the Communist Party." The Communist Party, whether in Russia or China, can account for over 100 million deaths in the 20th century and its views are integral and foundational from key originators of CRT.

Are these above examples positive ways to combat racism and lift people up from inequality? Should we use racism to irradicate racism? When elevating those who have been subjected to discrimination and/or racism – is it also important to tear others down in the process who have not been personally responsible (e.g. our children)? How do children feel about themselves, their families, and their race when presented with these messages in a systematic way?

Let's go back to the most pressing issue at hand – suicide among our youth. In a recent *Business Wire* article, it notes that "suicide is the second leading cause of death for teens and young adults, and according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), teens are of growing concern with rates of suicidal ideation and attempts nearly twice as high compared to pre- pandemic times." In addition the article noted that "ComPsych, the world's largest provider of integrated behavioral health and well-being services, has seen a double-digit increase in calls related to anxiety and depression worries with their teens." Further, "The teen mental health crisis is one of the most pressing challenges of our time and as the pandemic continues, we can see the confluence of crisis exacerbate anxiety, depression and thoughts of suicide," said Dr. Richard A. Chaifetz, Founder, Chairman and CEO of ComPsych.

Considering rising shame, depression, anxiety, and suicide among our youth -- my question stands: who shares the responsibility? Are we allowing shame and guilt to build from concepts being taught in school without the important focus on the content of our character? It's been asked, and I'll chime in, are we unwittingly encouraging our children to fight with their friends instead of love their neighbor as themselves?

When considering all the investments schools have made in Social Emotional Learning (SEL) -- we must ask the uncomfortable questions such as: What happens to children and teens when they are classified as oppressors and others are classified as victims? Do we fan the flames of self-loathing for some and encourage feelings of victimhood in others? What happened to love conquers all? Where is one of the noblest of qualities -- forgiveness? Where are the essential virtues of kindness, respect, and honesty? What is the focus of SEL in our schools and how does CRT fit within its framework? Is CRT healthy for our children or does it cause further harm? Who is brave enough to find out those answers?

Let us, as adults, agree to disagree on unresolvable issues that presently divide us. Let us set those divisions aside, while making honest efforts to unearth the causes, and find actionable solutions to help heal the hurts within our children. Those hurts displayed in feelings of anxiety, shame, and depression are taking root at an alarming rate. Let's not add to the burden our children bear. Instead, let us lighten the burden and bring health and healing to ALL children.

Sincerely,

Rep. Kristey Williams