

A hearing of Ames school officials before an Iowa House committee on the district's recent Black Lives Matter at School week is over, but conversations about **schools'** work to have more inclusive environments and understanding about all aspects of American **history** are not.

The district's efforts and the conversations that surrounded them — in the form of support and criticism — got the attention of the Iowa House's Government Oversight Committee, which on Tuesday heard from Superintendent Jenny Risner, Director of Equity Anthony Jones, school board member Monic Behnken — who leads the board's equity committee — and Executive Director of Education Jeff Hawkins.

Several lawmakers on the committee said they were deeply troubled by the district's implementation of the week, pointing to moral objections or perceived political or ideological bias in the content, and communications from people who purportedly said they had concerns of their own but were afraid to speak out.

The district began **Black History** Month on Feb. 1 with the Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action, during which teachers engaged students with guiding principles through free resources from outside organizations. Stated goals for the week included to affirm students' diverse Black identities, offer students a sense of belonging they might not otherwise have been feeling, and expand students' perspectives on **Black history** and life.

District spokesman Eric Smidt said after the hearing, "As a District, we are incredibly proud of the way that Superintendent Risner, Dr. Hawkins, Dr. Jones, and Dr. Behnken represented Ames at the House Oversight Committee hearing. We want to thank the committee for their questions about the Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action and for the opportunity to present the amazing equity work that is taking place in our **community**."

Opinions among Ames'

faith communities

Mark Vance — lead pastor at Cornerstone Church in Ames — was among people in Ames who expressed concerns about the district's Black Lives Matter week when it was first presented to the public in January, and he also watched last week's House hearing.

Vance told the Tribune after the hearing he continued to have concerns about the district's approach and said — as did last week House Government Oversight Committee chairwoman Rep. Holly Brink, R-Oskaloosa, and member Rep. Bobby Kaufmann, R-Wilton — he had received communication from more people with concerns who did not want to disclose their names for fear of retaliation.

"From our congregation, I have received 50+ emails," Vance said. "From beyond our congregation,

I have spoken to numerous individuals."

He said he agrees there should be respect and dignity for all people, "kindness and empathy to reduce bullying and hateful speech," and that Black History Month should be taught.

However, Vance added, among other concerns, "The primary aim of a school is not to promote social morality or coach a child through their questions of sexual identity. When a school tries to exist as a social institution that does too much, it infringes on the roles that should be reserved for parents, pastors, and other leaders. And when a school tries to do too much, it will end up distracted from its core mission of education."

During last week's hearing, Rep. Jon Jacobsen, R-Council Bluffs, asked if Ames school officials could see how some people "of creed or religious sensibilities" might have apprehension about a chilling of speech or fear for their freedom of exercise.

Superintendent Risner answered, "We recognize that," and added, "we absolutely know that these are difficult and challenging topics."

Letters from other faith communities and secular institutions in Ames in support of the district's work were included in the district's packet of information for the House committee — including from Ames United Church of Christ, United Way of Story County, the Ames NAACP branch and Ames Jewish Congregation.

The Ames Jewish Congregation wrote Feb. 14: "We understand that several religious institutions, citing moral and religious reasons, have opposed the inclusive education emphasized by this program. We believe inclusive programming reflects the moral and religious views of many people of Ames."

Another letter, from Bethesda Lutheran Church in Ames — undated and addressed to the House committee — more explicitly acknowledged and supported the aspects of the Black Lives Matter at School week that affirmed LGBTQ students, mirroring the congregation's own efforts "to learn about and address issues of systemic racism and LGBTQ+ discrimination, both locally and beyond."

Some legislators have been working on limitations

Rep. Kaufmann said during last week's hearing, "I have no problem with the most controversial stuff in the world being taught ... but when you only present one side, you are creating an atmosphere of incredible bias, and it is, in my definition, the absolute definition of indoctrination."

He added, "We've seen this with K-12 schools. We've seen this with the (Iowa Board of) Regents. If it requires the Legislature making you provide both sides, I'm all for it."

Limiting what schools teach or mandating how they approach curriculum and work on diversity and inclusion has been a hot topic among state lawmakers this year.

Efforts to ban the use of the New York Times' "1619 Project" that reframes the way slavery and the contributions of Black Americans are presented, or to require written consent from a student's

parent or guardian for their student to receive instruction relating to gender identity in grades one through six — kindergarteners could not have been provided any such instruction — did not make it past a key legislative deadline to move forward.

What is still alive is a proposal that public **schools** and colleges could not require diversity and inclusion trainings that teach "divisive concepts" such as that Iowa is "fundamentally racist or sexist."

Other lawmakers have pushed back against such efforts.

Last week's newsletter from Rep. Ross Wilburn, D-Ames — a member of the Black Caucus who also leads the Iowa Democratic Party — labeled the House hearing with Ames educators as "an unprecedented review of school curriculum" and an example of "micromanaging."

"The lawmakers were reacting to right-wing blogs, hearsay, and innuendos from **community** members they refused to name," Wilburn's newsletter continued. "The **discussion** centered around many false claims about a Black **History** Month event at the school district, including indoctrination, racism, dog-whistle accusations of Marxist leanings, and assertions of human rights violations. There was no evidence provided to show that laws were broken or any human rights violations occurred."

## Movement for **schools**

to promote equity, inclusion

These conversations come after a turbulent year of massive nationwide protests against racial injustice and police violence — including calls that Black queer and trans lives matter, too — a divisive presidential election and at times violent transition of power, and a pandemic that's disproportionately affected Black and other communities of color and exacerbated violence against Asian communities.

Jeanne Dyches, an assistant professor at Iowa State University's School of Education, said while this political moment may be unprecedented, debates about what **schools** teach and how are not, because curriculum "has and always will be tailored to the political."

Dyches said political, in that context, doesn't mean Republican or Democrat, but it's about belief systems and value systems.

She said when people argue about what should or shouldn't be taught, "they're always arguing about more than curriculum," and debates about what it means to be educated or what the purpose of school is have happened since there have been **schools**.

Though these debates may come and go over time, Dyches said "You should be invested, because it's more than just what kids are learning. It's about who gets to matter in the classroom," including people who look, live, love or worship differently.

Who is in curriculum or not sends messages about students' worth, she said, and controlling the

narrative of curriculum can limit students' ability to question the world around them. "Some folks don't want to see a lot of change in who is being represented in our curriculum," she said.

Teachers, educators and students "are and always have been agents of change," she said. "Independent of what's happening down in the (Iowa) Capitol, in (Washington) D.C., or anywhere else, change happens because people push back. People question. People demand their right to exist."

Damian Thompson, the director of public policy and communications for Iowa Safe Schools — an advocacy and resources organization for LGBTQ and allied students — said some rural and urban school districts have become more conscious about the needs of their students, especially students within marginalized populations.

Thompson said the COVID-19 pandemic has elevated awareness of mental health concerns, and what's perhaps changed most markedly about schools' work over the past year has been a result of the shift to remote learning. "There's a lot more online resources available that schools are tapping into," he said, whether that's students themselves or teachers doing professional development.

In terms of any present momentum beyond that for schools to promote equity and inclusion, he said "it's been relatively the same, but it's just kind of been over the last 10 years or so, a slow uptick of schools kind of dabbling here or there, or going all in and saying 'We want to be the most inclusive community for our students to live in and succeed.'"

"There's definitely a right way and a wrong way to go about all of these sensitive topics in the classroom," Thompson said. He said schools should research their curriculum and make sure it is inclusive of all students.

He also said it's possible to introduce LGBTQ topics to elementary students, but age appropriateness is important. In terms of who decides what is age-appropriate, "A lot of times it's common sense, based on the community that you're in, for sure."

Rather than address LGBTQ topics directly to elementary students, that can look like lessons on "What does it mean to be a good friend? What does inclusivity look like? What does being an ally look like?" for example, rather than being like, 'This is what cisgender and transgender means,' because that's really something more appropriate for middle school or high school-level topics, in our experience, at least," he said.

"Just kind of starting with the framework of inclusivity and acceptance really can build up the foundation for larger discussions later on in school," Thompson said.

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