

Hello,

Thank you for taking time to share your thoughts. I will be making a public statement at the next Board meeting.

Ray



**Dr. Ray Lechner**  
Superintendent  
Wilmette Public Schools District 39  
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On May 15, 2017, at 11:21 AM,

wrote:

Hello Ray,

Thank you for your response to my questions from the last Board Meeting. I just wanted to clarify and follow up with some questions. While this is addressed to you, I've cc'd the BOE and welcome any of their thoughts and responses as well.

I've put the questions in bold to hopefully make your reading easier. Also, instead of including my questions within your email below, I've just quoted some of your email statements around which I'm seeking clarification. Additionally, I've attached my comments from the April BOE meeting as I recognize that it's virtually impossible for you to have time to go back and watch the video.

I recognize that you are very busy and I always appreciate your responsiveness to the community. Please stick with me through this email.

First of all, I want to reinforce and clearly state that I support empathy. With that in mind, here are some of my thoughts and requests for clarification:

1. Regarding the "increased reports of before/after school incidences, racial and/or religious tension, and social conflicts/bullying within social media." My question was and still is simply a request for data.

- **What are the actual numbers associated with these reports, or is this a "gut-feel" statement regarding the increases meaning the district has no data but it just seems like there has been an increase?** For example, are there any information like the following:

*In the 2015-2016 school year there were 'x' number of before/after school incidences with respect to racial tension involving 'x' number of students.*

*In the 2014-2015 there were 'x' number of incidents of before/after school incidences with respect to racial tension involving 'x' number of students.*

*In the 2013-2014 there were 'x' number of incidents of before/after school incidences with respect to racial tension involving 'x' number of students.*

2. CRC Involvement - my understanding was that the purpose of CRC was to independently, with some input from the District, help determine what the community felt was important to help D39 fulfill its mission. **However, it sounds as though the CRC is more of a research entity used to support the district in current initiatives and knowing how to best implement those initiatives. Do I understand this correctly?**

3. Curriculum Clarification - Thank you for clarifying that there is no new curriculum. **However, are any strategies and conversations that happen outside the context of 2nd Step simply considered supplemental materials to our social emotional learning curriculum?** It seems like there is a lot of social emotional training occurring that is outside of the confines of a curriculum and is therefore, without structure and transparency. Social emotional learning is good and necessary, yet it must be well defined since many of the topics are teaching values that families feel strongly and very differently about. **Do we need to broaden our SEL curriculum to be in line with the empathy initiative?**

For example:

"The culture of empathy strategic goal goes beyond diversity in terms of race, religion, and gender identity."

**How will you be handling those discussions, specifically about religion and gender identity?**

As parents, my husband and I are very intentional in the values we teach our children regarding these topics. While our teaching always includes respect, kindness and compassion, some values may be different from those of others around us. Therefore, we are the ones who are and want to continue to be the interface when it comes having these sensitive conversations. If the school would like to be having these conversations, I believe they need to do it via the parents.

4. D39 and the National SEED Project

I am concerned that D39 is "not opposed to the organizational goals" the National SEED Project has of focusing on "systems of oppression, power, and privilege." Included in their goal is a focus on white privilege, male privilege and white supremacy.

<https://nationalseedproject.org/about-us/about-seed>

<https://nationalseedproject.org/itemid-fix/categories/conference-appearances>

**Given this context, is it true that D39 is not opposed to this organization's goals?**

In August, our teachers were trained by a national SEED representative "who spoke about engaging in conversations about race, inclusion, and diversity, and

preparing ourselves to do so while recognizing our own feelings involved," and that during the training, "We also talked about strategies that we could use to help students *if/when* conversations start. " **Therefore, if and when these conversations arise will these conversations be in the context of oppression, power and/or privilege?**

Furthermore, the two SEED representatives at the December empathy night presentation were introduced by Ms. Jackson. She introduced SEED and spoke at length regarding their work with the organization. I am concerned that while several administrators, including yourself, were in attendance, no one seems to have known anything about SEED or the speakers' affiliation with them. **How is it that everyone except Ms. Jackson was ignorant of the National SEED Project organization up until my mention of them at the April BOE meeting?** D39 needs to do a better job of understanding the backgrounds of those who will be training our teachers and parents.

Finally, I too support conversations and learning that build empathy and understanding. However, I do not support the goals of the National SEED Project to have these conversations within the context of power, oppression and privilege. This is not healthy for our children.

*I know we all want what is best for the children of D39. I believe that this empathy initiative is one of fostering and reinforcing a culture of empathy. I support empathy and I am supportive of working together to continue the great tradition and mission of D39.*

I know this has been a long email, and I appreciate you taking the time to consider my thoughts and look forward to your response. I am always happy to discuss these things and collaborate on solutions as partners in education.

Best,

Wilmette Resident 12 years  
D39 Parent

The following are my comments from the D39 BOE Meeting on April 25, 2017:

"Hello, My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I live in Wilmette. I have lived in and had children in this district for 12 years. Prior to that we lived in New York, Boston and the Bay Area.

Recently, I have had the opportunity to attend our 4th grade innovation fair, school's open house, and parent teacher conferences. I was blown away with the amount of goodness occurring. Students are engaged and learning in different ways and different medium. At the innovation fair children were recognized problems to be solved, invented a solution and then articulately explained and demonstrated their solutions. Their creativity and ingenuity reminded me of their beyond their years.

As I walked through the halls at our open house I saw walls decorated with expressions of kindness, respect, compassion and other time tested virtues and expressions showing excited and engaged students learning to be forces for good in the world.

Parent teacher conference continually leave me inspired and in awe of our teachers. They care about who my child is, and they learn and solicit my feedback as we partner in educating my children. An underlying and significant aspect of these conferences is the teachers' desire to really understand and engage my child in meaningful learning. Additionally, as my children had had varying special needs, the school was proactive and professional in seek a collaborative course of action. These meetings often included a meeting room filled with professional each seeking to help my child, amidst the many in the school. In a district of over 3500 students, they are focusing on my **one** child! As a mother of many children, I get how it can be challenging to really focus on the one, yet how important that is! In my years in this district, I have not run into one "dud" teacher. Not to say that our teachers are perfect - to expect them to be more than human is inhumane. However, they are passionate about helping each individual child learn in the way that that child learns.

This year, the district's number one initiative is to create a climate of empathy in our schools. I understand that this is a proactive approach. My background in computer science has trained me to approach problems in a process oriented, data driven manner. And right now, I am having a hard time understanding a few things:

- 1 Problem - My first question: what is the problem that this initiative is trying to solve? I understand that recently there have been more racial and even religious incidents, however when asked exactly how many there are, the number of incidents ranges from 3-10. As a rough estimate, If we have had 35 students involved, this represents one one hundredth of our overall district population. That means 99% of the students are not exhibiting issues in this area, or they already have a way to resolve the issue such that it does not merit priority one initiative. I understand and feel these problems are

important to address. However, why is our current system not sufficient? Why do these problems call for a priority one district wide strategic initiative? Again I'm simply interested in the data that these decisions were based on.

2 CRC and community support Survey - Where is the report from the March survey? These are important results to help us understand parent perspective. Furthermore, I don't understand why we have begun so much work on this initiative prior to receiving the results of the survey or even the CRC report itself. Again, where is the data to support the decision?

3 Training program and Implementation Curriculum - Has training curriculum to ensure best practices in helping us go about this sensitive subject matter been appropriately vetted? Based on the information in the board materials regarding the teacher training - I am concerned.

In August and last week our teachers took part in professional development days. The August training was led by an individual strongly affiliated with an organization called the National SEED project.

Seed has good intent to **“to drive...societal change toward greater equity and diversity. “they seek to connect our lives to one another and to society at large by acknowledging systems of oppression, power, and privilege.”** These intentions initially seem to create empathy.

**Additionally founding principles of Seed include white privilege, and then added male privilege and even heterosexual couple privilege, etc. They want the educate the members of these varying groups to recognize their “unearned advantage, which can also be described as exemption from discrimination.”**

**If I understand this correctly, this training will build a culture of empathy by teaching our children and teachers that they or their peers are inherently flawed and oppressive if they are white, male or even have heterosexual parents?**

**To me this sounds like it can quickly turn into a subliminal shaming curriculum: White children are flawed because they are white. Our sons, husbands and brothers are flawed because they are men. Our children of heterosexual parents are flawed because they have a mother and a father in the home.**

**This discourages unity and divides children of all races, genders and homelife situation. It is divisive and confusing. This will plant destructive seeds of doubt, resentment and inadequacy that will tear at the identity and self esteem of all children.**

**This curriculum seems to want to first break down our students and teachers - to recognize their flawed natures because of their identity. Because, it is not until they recognize how oppressive they are can they actually even be compassionate, kind or respectful.**

**The message is confusing. It can quickly shift from collaboration and understanding, to simply tearing down one group in order to elevate another. We know from our gut instincts and history this never works for any group. It only leads to long term, ugly results.**

**It is true, I will never know what it feels like to be a native american man, or the child of homosexual parents. Nor will anyone ever know what it like to walk the path that I have walked. Yet, our focus should be on building up all people by applying and continuing to work on time tested virtues of love, kindness, respect and compassion for all people.**

**This philosophy does not seem to be based on time tested virtues, and thereby, is somewhat of a social experiment on our children. I do not wish my children to be involved in a social experiment. It is far, far beyond the scope of public education.**

**There are other curriculums in the realm of character education that can help us to achieve the goal of having an empathetic culture in our schools with greater clarity and less risk of damage to everyone's self worth.**

**In conclusion, I would ask that you please**

- 1 Clarify the problem we are trying to solve**
- 2 Determine valid community feedback**
- 3 Vet a character education program that has been chosen based on extent of the problem we have**

**"Based on my years of experience walking our school's halls, attending school functions and interacting with teachers and school professionals, I do feel like the overall climate is one of empathy. It is NOT perfect and it does have it's problems. However, overall my vantage point sees a climate of empathy.**

**"Nevertheless, my view is limited. If it is indeed found that our schools are or have the potential to be non-empathetic places of learning then yes, let's continue on this strategic initiative with a clear connection to principles that build self esteem in all children and people. But please, continue with care. I ask you to take seriously your responsibility and the public trust to use our community tax dollars responsibly and to educate our children.**

**Thank you."**

**---End of my comments from 4/25/17 BOE meeting**