

Hello Julie,

Principal Becky Littmann told me that she discussed all the good things already happening at Central School (and all schools) to support diversity and empathy at the elementary level. I am happy to reiterate.

The District's School Climate initiative is an important component of our strategic plan and is one of this year's new initiatives. During the May Board of Education meeting, you heard community comments that reflected concern about the Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity (SEED) organization. You may also be aware of the Seminar Day that New Trier High School hosted this year, which caused some concerns in the broader community. I honestly think that there was some "spill over" to D39.

D39 addressed social emotional learning using Second Step, which has been in place for several years. It is not a traditional curriculum created by our D39 staff, but rather a program purchased to support our teachers. The description you provided in your email regarding your daughter's experience is evidence of what we strive to achieve through the Second Step; I am **thrilled** to know that it's working. Thank you for sharing your daughter's experience with me!

Our goal is exactly what you have stated in your email -- students should feel safe to discuss differences, speak respectfully about them, and be accepting of each other. At the K-4 level, teachers use Second Step to help children learn to be aware of other's feelings. Students are taught how they can "walk in another person's shoes." Children participate in role playing activities, learn to ask questions to understand others' perspectives, and are taught to respect different opinions and viewpoints. The program is researched-based and is used in all the elementary schools District-wide. While Second Step has been successful, we accept that social conflict and bullying still occur within our schools. It may not be often or extreme. However, even one incident tells us we need to continue prioritizing a positive school environment and being proactive in our approach. The School Climate initiative helps keep us accountable. It will ensure that staff are prepared to create a safe space for children where empathy can thrive, students can express their own opinions and perspectives, and differing viewpoints are respected.

So yes, I did say "No." And I still say, "No." However, what I am saying "No" to is the implication from a handful of parents, that we are developing some new curriculum that nobody knows about. We are not. And we have no plans to do so. While I did say there was no curriculum, I was referring to a traditional curriculum created by D39 staff. However, as explained above, Second Step is a program that has been in place for years.

We are also developing a Statement of Inclusion. That Draft Statement is intended to communicate that D39 is open to everyone - students, parents, and staff. The draft is posted in our Board Agenda:
http://www.wilmette39.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server_360846/File/Board%20of%20Ed/PublicPacket/2017-06-19.html

I hope this communication helped to clarify your concerns.

Thanks,



Dr. Ray Lechner
Superintendent
Wilmette Public Schools District 39
www.wilmette39.org | 847.512.6030

On Jun 19, 2017, at 12:05 PM, Julie Cho <jcho8@chicagobooth.edu> wrote:
Ray,

I am following up on the equity and empathy climate initiative conversation at the last board meeting. First of all, I cannot agree more with you and all of the board members that we - the students, parents, teachers, and everyone in the district- need to be empathetic to each other. I am surprised, however, if what I am hearing is that this has not been part of the curriculum yet in the district to teach our kids to be empathetic to other human beings. I do not honestly believe that our school district isn't already doing what it should be doing in teaching our kids to be "nice" to each other, which is why I want to know what it is you are planing to implement. Here is why.

At the beginning of the school year, when we first moved to Wilmette from Northbrook, one of my kids, Priscilla, was told by one of her classmates that she looked Asian. And apparently, this became somewhat of a topic of their conversation that day with other kids joining in. She came home, and this was the topic of our dinner conversation that evening. Of our three kids, she is the one that looks most like me, and she is the one who looks Asian. You cannot tell that the other two have Asian heritage by their looks. The truth is Priscilla is very proud of the fact that, unlike her siblings, SHE looks Asian, and that SHE looks like her mother. The conversation that took place in her class regarding her Asian look is something that would have never happened in Northbrook, where about 20% of her classmates were Asians. So, it was a VERY different experience for her in this new school, and it was absolutely perfect! She was the center of the conversation during this talk in class, and she was able to "show off" her Korean language, and talk about some of the Korean traditional stuff we do at home with her friends. She is absolutely happy at Central. So much happier than she was in District 31 even though she had nothing but positive, happy, and pleasant experience at District 31.

My point is that this is a situation that could have been very sensitive with Priscilla being the only Asian looking kid in her class, and yet this was a very positive, very happy, very pleasant experience for her. You are already doing a great job from what I can see. So, when you say you are going to implement something to address some of the issues that arise from having a diverse environment, I want to make sure that this initiative does not change this dynamics or make kids afraid to discuss their differences. I want to make sure that this initiative you are planning does not, in any way, discourages kids like her classmates to point out or ask about her "Asian" look. I want to make sure that, in an effort to address hateful comments and behaviors done by some kids, the initiative you are talking about does not, in fact, shatter this environment, where kids currently feel safe to comment, and discuss about the difference they see in their classmates when it was meant friendly.

Kids like Priscilla should not feel that her Asian heritage is something her classmates cannot discuss with her. This will teach Priscilla nothing but shame toward her Asian heritage if you create an environment where kids are afraid to talk to her about her "Asian" look. This is the reason why I am concerned about what it is you are planning to implement.

I am very troubled by your comments that there is no curriculum, and when I pressed, you said "we are not doing anything". I have never seen an organization, that can implement anything without strategic planning. If there is NO curriculum, what is it that you are implementing exactly? How do I know what it is you are implementing? How do I know you are not going to make Priscilla feel ashamed of her Korean heritage with this initiative? You kept talking about you are NOT doing SEED curriculum, but why do I care about what you are NOT doing? What I care about is what you ARE doing. If there is no curriculum, how do you measure the outcome? How do you know what is being taught and how it is being taught? How do you keep your teachers and students accountable? This makes absolutely no sense! We live in the most advanced country in the world, in one of the most affluent neighborhoods in the country with some of the most highly educated intellectuals as parents. How are we to believe you are

implementing anything without a curriculum? I feel downright insulted to be honest. But more than anything, I am concerned about the emotional well being of my children when you tell me you are going to implement something that cannot hold anyone accountable for anything that is being taught to the kids.

As I commented at the last meeting, and as I described in this email, my kids ARE the diversity in this school district. The "empathy environment" you are trying to create to respond to the diversity in the district has my kids at the center of that "empathy environment". I have to know what it is you are planning to implement, and how. I demand that your plans be more transparent.

Thank you so much!

Julie Cho

[312-296-0627](tel:312-296-0627)

jcho8@chicagobooth.edu

Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God.

Julie,

Thank you for taking time to email us your views on these important matters. Your support is appreciated.

Ray



Dr. Ray Lechner
Superintendent
Wilmette Public Schools District 39
www.wilmette39.org | 847.512.6030

On May 30, 2017, at 1:56 PM, Julie Lipford <julielipford@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Dr. Lechner and members of the Board of Education,

I am a D39 parent with children at both Harper Elementary and Highcrest Middle schools. Recently, I was able to attend most of the the May 22nd Board of Education Meeting and review the video from both the April 25th and May 22nd Board of Education Meetings. In listening to these meetings, it appears that there is a concerted effort to speak out against D39 initiatives that may benefit social equity in our district. In light of this, I feel compelled to communicate my support for initiatives that further promote equity.

Specifically, I appreciate the 2016-2017 Strategic Initiative, School Climate: Creating a Culture of Empathy, including any related effort for our children and staff to better understand oppression and the social impacts thereof; I support introducing restorative practices where it is helpful; I support leveraging Illinois prevailing wage data where applicable in compensation and contracts; lastly I support D39 providing input on Property Tax appeals where they do today to prevent possible inequities.

I feel that our children and the community will directly benefit from a culture that promotes equity as well as empathy.

Thank you for your service to our community.
Julie Davis Lipford

Thank you for taking time to detail your views. I agree that we have similar views as you expressed, *"create a safe place for students to express their opinions, perspectives and beliefs and to be a place where all students feel respected and included."*



Dr. Ray Lechner
Superintendent
Wilmette Public Schools District 39
www.wilmette39.org | 847.512.6030

On May 26, 2017, at 3:44 PM, E. Downs <getdowns@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Ray,

Thank you for your email and for your statement at the most recent board meeting. As is often the case in these situations, we actually agree on more than we disagree. I appreciate the district's desire to create a safe place for students to express their opinions, perspectives and beliefs and to be a place where all students feel respected and included. I appreciate the approach of positivity and kindness. I support all of this.

Hopefully, I can help to relieve some of your head scratching as to my concerns and aims in all of this.

First let me say that I appreciate that the district has no intent to establish an ongoing partnership with the National SEED Project. I hope that the same goes for the Pacific Education Group. (This past year six teachers from WJHS and HMS attended a Beyond Diversity Seminar at New Trier. Beyond Diversity is a program run by PEG.) I also recognize that the district did not intentionally seek out individuals who were affiliated with SEED and PEG, but that the district was referred to these individuals because they seem to be knowledgeable about how to have conversations around race, gender, etc.

So, my main concern is with the methodology and fundamental ideologies of the National SEED Project and of the Pacific Education Group. (For the most part, I discuss SEED. However, PEG closely aligns with SEED and so, much of what I discuss below can be applied to PEG as well.)

SEED's intents to create conversations are good, however, their fundamental philosophies are based on ideologies of white privilege and male privilege. They are strong promoters of this agenda. Though SEED may not directly talk about these ideologies within a school setting, this agenda will percolate through in the conversations they are facilitating. While I understand that individuals of varying genders and races have advantages and navigate the world differently (eg the personal experience you shared in your email), I believe that these ideologies, if focused on to create solutions, are actually damaging and divisive.

Additionally, because SEED is all about creating conversations, I think it is safe to assume that anyone who is affiliated with or trained by them will automatically infuse SEED ideologies into the way they go about engaging in those conversations. Again, I don't think SEED affiliates are going to necessarily name "white privilege" or "male privilege" in the initial facilitation of their conversations, but as time goes on, these ideologies will come through as the focus. SEED is very forthright in admitting that they are focusing on conversations of power, privilege and oppression. *However, repeated conversations in this context, even if it is only hinted to, will be damaging and divisive in the near and/or long terms. Again, these ideologies, if focused on to create solutions, are actually detrimental to **all** students, regardless of race, gender, religion or home life situation.*

I want to reiterate and recognize that each member of the administration, Board of Education, faculty and staff truly cares about our children. I sincerely believe that the individuals involved in D39 work hard to create nurturing learning environments. I also may be at fault for quickly jumping to the defense of our teachers if I smell even a whiff of criticism wafting their way. Our teachers work incredibly hard and care immensely about their students, and I am in constant awe of all that they do. I know I'm preaching to the choir on this point.

I also recognize that the topic of empathy is one of many, many concerns on the plates of our administrators and teachers. Thus, it may be difficult to perform a thorough due diligence of those professionals who are asked to assist our district in its various endeavors. In light of this, I also believe that these organizations often provide themselves as the path of least resistance to school districts. It is easy for schools to see them as the "go-to" for these conversations.

Therefore, I am sharing the due diligence that I have done in which I used the most reliable data I could find. What I have found is alarming and worrisome, and so I have asked questions regarding any connection, even tangentially (eg having speakers who are affiliated with these organizations), that D39 has had with SEED and PEG. Though on the surface these organizations desire to promote connection, as one drills down deeper into their methodologies and ideologies, it is clear that their path towards solutions, no matter how popular it may be, usually ends in greater shame and resentment, greater disconnection and divisiveness.

Again, I know that D39 would never intentionally engage with these types of organizations and the unintended consequences of their philosophies. I hope that what I have shared will be helpful and informative.

We as a community and a country need to embark on the path that leads toward unity. I believe that D39 will lead out on that path as we continue to focus on kindness, compassion, service, optimism and gratitude. We will continue to foster and reinforce a culture of empathy.

Thank you again for the dedicated work you personally are doing and have done for the children in this district. As a side note, you and I have been in this district about the same amount of time, although I may outlast you as our family will have students in D39 for 13 more years! Levity aside, thanks for hearing me out on this topic. I don't necessarily need an official response, but just to know that you understand my comments above and that you will consider them.

Sincerely,
Emily

On Fri, May 19, 2017 at 9:25 AM, Ray Lechner <lechnerr@wilmette39.org> wrote:
Dear Emily,

I appreciate the sharing of your views. However, I must admit that I find myself scratching my head, as I'm not sure what your aim is. I sincerely worry that you are making assumptions and drawing conclusions about District 39 that are simply not true.

First, let me address the professional training programs you've written about. As we have stated before, while some panelists we worked with are affiliated with SEED, our teachers are not trained by SEED. We have no plans to establish an ongoing partnership with SEED. These panelists are members of our community and were invited to bring a wide range of qualifications and experiences. One is a staff member at New Trier High School and a school board member in Evanston.

We believe these types of programs help our staff to more deeply consider what a culture of empathy means through their own experiences. Let me give an example from my own personal experience. I am white, I move through the world as white, and I get treated a certain way as a result. I have a very good friend who is black, he moves through the world as black, and he gets treated a certain way as a result. He and I both understand that he does not get treated the way I do. That is the reality of our world. For me to empathize with his experience, I have to understand that I am treated differently than he is, only because of the way I look. This acknowledgement of how each of us is perceived is important for adults. It helps us understand differences and fosters a culture of inclusion in our schools.

I want to emphasize that the programs I'm referring to, and that you write about, were for parents and our adult staff. Adults have a range of experiences and an ability to process subtle points that is much greater than what we expect of our students.

And that's important to remember because of my second point: I need to keep reinforcing that we have no "empathy curriculum." We do have Second Step that is used for supporting social-emotional growth in District 39. Beyond that, as explained in my previous email, we engage students in promoting kindness and connections. Creating a culture of empathy is about developing an understanding of one another and promoting inclusivity. As I said previously: *"Again, there is no curriculum, but a way to help each other be aware and better understand differences."*

The District's empathy initiative is about creating a safe place for students to express their opinions, perspectives, and beliefs, where all students feel respected and included. The approach that is used across the District continues within a context of positivity and kindness toward one another, not shame or oppression. This is evidenced through the activities promoted across the schools such as recognizing small acts of kindness, using kind statements to "fill one another's buckets," and working across grade levels to learn more about each other.

I hope this helps you understand how we think about empathy and inclusion.



Dr. Ray Lechner
Superintendent
Wilmette Public Schools District 39
www.wilmette39.org | 847.512.6030

On May 18, 2017, at 9:21 AM, E. Downs <getdowns@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Ray and members of the D39 Board of Education,

Please read the email exchange below. I have the permissions of Dr. Lamia to share her email with you. Thanks for your consideration.

Best,
Emily

P.S

Background to the emails below:

In an effort to understand the relationship between empathy, shame and SEED's methodology of connecting lives by "acknowledging systems of oppression, power, and privilege," I came across this article:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/intense-emotions-and-strong-feelings/201104/shame-concealed-contagious-and-dangerous-emotion>

Dr. Lamia is a psychologist and psychoanalyst who works with adults, adolescents and preteens in private practice in California. She is also a writer and a professor at the Wright Institute in Berkeley, California.

<https://www.teensafe.com/experts/dr-mary-c-lamia-ph-d/>

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Mary Lamia** <drmarylamia@gmail.com>

Date: Thu, May 11, 2017 at 4:58 PM

Subject: Re: Empathy Education and the National SEED Project

To: "E. Downs" <getdowns@gmail.com>

Dear Emily,

In my opinion you are absolutely correct that *"teaching children empathy in the context of power and oppression may have detrimental effects, either in the near or long terms."* I have seen the same detrimental effects in using this approach with adolescents, young adults, and even with psychology graduate students. While the goal of the approach is to teach empathy, the empathy of those who are "on the upside of power and privilege" leads them to take on the shame of those in the target group. Ultimately, the recipients respond defensively to this shame or with coping responses (much like the target group has done in the first place) that involve: 1) attacking themselves; 2) attacking others; 3) withdrawal; or 4) avoidance.

The adaptive response to internalized shame, both for the target group and those on the upside, must involve learning with interest; to be curious about, and interested in, the experience of the other while owning what one feels. Nobody *makes* another person feel a certain way. But it is important to understand that another person's behavior, demeanor, etc. can be a stimulus that triggers emotional memories and a particular emotional response in us. In addition, our beliefs are a composite of our emotional memories that have been linked by our cognitions to an ideology. Thus, people have varying beliefs about many things, and learning about them without judgement is important.

I hope this helps to guide your teaching and parent education. I wish I could offer resources, however the programs you mention have been the mode, regardless of their negative impact.

All best to you,
Mary Lamia
Mary C. Lamia, Ph.D.
<http://www.marylamia.com>
P.O. Box 163
Kentfield, CA 94914-0163
office: [\(415\) 457-2839](tel:(415)457-2839)
mobile: [\(415\) 302-8049](tel:(415)302-8049)

On May 11, 2017, at 1:32 PM, E. Downs <getdowns@gmail.com> wrote:

Dear Dr. Lamia,

I am a parent in the New Trier School District located just north of Chicago. I have 7 children ranging from 18 all the way down to 14 months. Five of my children attend these schools. Most people move to this district for the excellent public education.

Our local K-8 school district (WPS D39, 3500 children) has begun an initiative of creating a culture of empathy within our schools. We are a predominately white population (approximately 85%), and understandably, learning to understand those of differing backgrounds and cultures is beneficial for everyone both in and out of community.

In support of this initiative, our teacher training and parent education/seminar night have been lead by those are apart of the National SEED Project. (I assume that this will also be apart of the empathy curriculum taught to children.) This group is supportive of creating conversations of understanding by "acknowledging systems of power, oppression and privilege." (<https://nationalseedproject.org/about-us/about-seed>)

The founder, Peggy McIntosh, wrote a couple of articles on white privilege. You may be familiar with her writings. (<https://nationalseedproject.org/about-us/white-privilege>)

My concern is that teaching children empathy in the context of power and oppression may have detrimental effects, either in the near or long terms. Telling a child that they are inherently oppressive because of the color of their skin, their gender or their sexual sexual orientation seems like a circuitous and confusing route toward empathy. While I can see how this would be beneficial for adults and mature adolescents, for children this seems like it could produce harmful side effects of shame and resentment.

So, is it possible that teaching children empathy in this context could lead to greater social divisiveness as it may create strong emotions of shame and resentment?

Additionally, I think there may be more straight forward ways and curricula to teach empathy. Do you know of any?

I know you are an expert in this area, and any suggestions, thoughts or guidance you can provide would be much appreciated.

Sincerely,

Emily Downs
Wilmette, IL

Lauren,

Thank you for sharing this email and giving a personal example.



Dr. Ray Lechner
Superintendent
Wilmette Public Schools District 39
www.wilmette39.org | 847.512.6030

On May 24, 2017, at 12:30 PM, Lauren wrote:

To the School Board of District 39,

I sent this note to Dr. Lechner and thought I should send along to you as well.

Regards,
Lauren Litchfield

Dear Dr. Lechner,

I wanted to take a moment to thank you for the wonderful memo you wrote regarding School Climate. Ever since the April board meeting, I have been upset and trying to figure out if and when I should speak at a meeting and make my voice heard. Your memo speaks to many of the points I wanted to address.

Unfortunately, my 2nd grade child, was on the receiving end of an insensitive religious comment this year. He/She was devastated and didn't understand why anyone would tell him/her, "I don't want to play with you because you are Jewish." One of your points in your announcement couldn't have been more spot on - an incident doesn't affect one student. His/Her entire class heard the comment as it was said in the hallway. I received numerous calls from other concerned parents asking about my child. Their child came home and told their parents what was said.

While I did report it to the principal, and there was an attempt to address the issue, in general, I don't feel like our teachers have the resources they need to handle these situations. I was encouraged to find out, while reading your memo, that the district is focusing on the staff this year and I hope this continues for years to come. Our world is continually changing and therefore, the development of our teachers needs to evolve as well.

We moved to Wilmette for many reasons. For starters, I knew the area well as I grew up here and am a Romona alumnae myself! But I also knew this was a welcoming community, with wonderful schools, and a perfect place to raise a family. I am extremely proud of the fact that District 39 established a strategic goal directly addressing empathy. I completely agree with you that if we want our kids to succeed and thrive in the world, our kids need to understand the importance of empathy, diversity, and inclusiveness.

I am eager for the results of the CRC survey. I fear that response rates will be low and therefore I am not sure how credible the results will be, but at least it is a starting point. I know how hard the committee works and their work is to be commended.

Again, I applaud you for writing this announcement and can't thank you enough for taking the culture of empathy so seriously. It means a great deal to me and my family and we look forward to the new initiatives that are forthcoming.

Best,
Lauren Litchfield
Wilmette

Hello Jennifer,

Thank you for taking time to share your thoughts.



Dr. Ray Lechner
Superintendent
Wilmette Public Schools District 39
www.wilmette39.org | 847.512.6030

On May 23, 2017, at 10:33 AM, Jennifer Manning <icej@sbcglobal.net> wrote:
Dear Dr. Lechner and Board Members -

At last night's board meeting, Ms. Kearney stated that no one opposes D39's E&E initiative, but I disagree so I'm writing to reiterate my support.

I have 3 children with wildly varying degrees of natural empathy. My own experience shows that empathy is not intuitive to the same degree in all children. I laud D39's efforts to explore it more.

A few parents expressed concern about source material for the program but I don't see a problem. As I understood Dr. Lechner, he said staff and teachers are not using a set curriculum but are seeking to incorporate lessons and guidance based on various training and materials throughout the education experience. I trust D39 teachers and staff to use their expertise and judgment in other areas, and I trust them to do the same in a meaningful and fair way when it comes to teaching empathy. I certainly trust them more than the specific parents who keep standing up at board meetings and wanting oversight over how/what my children are taught.

Finally, the studies I've read on empathy/equity education support some of Dr. Lechner's comments on the subject. Teaching them: (1) builds self-confidence, deeper relationships, positivity . . . which in turn has been shown to lead to better test results; (2) strengthens community and fosters more cooperative learning; and (3) builds better leadership skills. These are all things I want not only for my children, but for *all* the children in our district.

Thank you again for your time.

Jennifer Manning
Central School/Highcrest/WJHS parent

Good Morning Laura,

Thank you for taking time to write in support of our efforts.



Dr. Ray Lechner
Superintendent
Wilmette Public Schools District 39
www.wilmette39.org | 847.512.6030

On May 22, 2017, at 9:20 AM, Laura Fisher <lcfisher@sbcglobal.net> wrote:

Dear Dr. Lechner and District 39 board members:

I am writing to express my support for the 2016-17 Strategic Initiative - School Climate: Creating a Culture of Empathy.

In a world where our kids are inundated by lowest common denominator messages from reality TV and social media, and disrespectful rhetoric from our nation's leaders, we owe it to our kids to provide this type of guidance. Sadly, many children will not receive it at home. In addition to the statistics that the district has, I am aware of numerous anecdotal examples of disrespectful and discriminatory comments and behaviors in our school district. My own daughter was told by a male classmate not to "sass" him when she presented an opposing view point in reading class. She handled it with poise and maturity and was comfortable proceeding to state her viewpoint but I'm sure there are other students who internalized that sexist and disrespectful message and decided not to speak up, or on the flip side, felt empowered to further denigrate female classmates or those with differing views.

I applaud the district for being willing to work to foster a respectful school environment conducive to learning, and teaching our kids how to get along with each other and in the diverse world they will hopefully experience after school.

Best regards,
Laura Fisher

Laura Fisher Hetler
Cell 312-965-2129