

July 27, 2021

Dr. Cade Brumley, State Superintendent
Louisiana Department of Education
1201 N. Third Street
Baton Rouge, LA 70802

Dear Dr. Brumley,

It is with a heavy heart, yet clear mind that I submit this letter as formal notice of my resignation as Assistant Superintendent, Office of Equity, Inclusion and Opportunities at the Louisiana Department of Education effective August 22, 2021.

While there has been no sole event that has led to my decision to resign, it is a culmination of experiences that has me hoping that my resignation will lead to the examination of practices, reflection of behaviors, and a pivot from political agendas that have caused generations of educational inequities for historically excluded students and families.

When I began this role a year ago, I was humbled for the opportunity to serve in my purpose- to alleviate educational inequities for both historically excluded populations, and those that have been disenfranchised by systemic barriers. It was after a few months of my involvement in an agency initiative that I began to question the value and actual impact of my seat at the table. I learned that while I had a seat at the table, the seat is only as valuable as the mindset of those sitting with you. For generations, People of Color have fought to have a seat at the table, to be in the room, and to have a voice in decisions. However, diversity, absent meaningful inclusion, is a measure of shallow compliance, leading merely to beautiful office pictures with colorful faces. Conversely, diversity as an authentic strategy leads to real inclusion, systemic change, and, ultimately, equitable outcomes. To retain a demographically diverse workforce and embrace cognitive diversity in thought, it requires the organization to create an environment with conditions that ensures staff is not met with implicit bias that indirectly, yet purposefully limits their tenure and opportunity to be successful.

As the only Black Assistant Superintendent currently serving, I am keenly aware at all times of my word choice, my tone of voice, my facial expressions, and the unspoken requirement to know the answer to every question I may be asked, because the day that I do not is the day that someone will question my ability to serve in such a capacity. My experiences in this role have amplified these thoughts for me. For instance, my colleagues are seen as the experts in their given area and clarifying questions are asked of them to seek understanding. My expertise has been challenged through leading statements and questions, requirements of processes to be codified in policy, and excluded from conversations about the work I lead.

During a virtual meeting, on more than one occasion, I have experienced the refusal of a stakeholder to refer to me by my professional title, but continuously refer to the white male on the call by their professional title. In an email exchange with a board member, the professional titles of my team member and I were disregarded, no matter how many times we signed our names at the end of the communication, or how it appeared in the signature line, the board member continued to type "Ms." instead of "Dr." This experience highlights the dismal reality at the intersection of my race and my gender, and a first-hand experience of subtle microaggression.

It is tempting to ignore microaggressions, or minimize them to just unintentional and incidental behaviors, considering that our country still deals with seemingly more overt forms of racial and gender discrimination. It is the build-up of the every-day slights, which have become a thousand papercuts. The normalization of microaggressions in the workplace is unacceptable, and to be placed in a position where I have to feel concerned about the impact that

addressing microaggressions may have on my professional career is even more unacceptable. The emotional labor is often placed on the person that has been aggressed, emotional labor that is often triggered by euphemisms such as, “have thicker skin,” and “don’t be so sensitive.” We are often asked to educate those that have engaged in the behavior because they “didn’t mean it,” or they’re not “racist.” Microaggressions most often emerge from our deeply-rooted biases against those who are different from us. Our perspective is often shaped from our upbringing and as a result many times they do not surface until they surface. This is a core tenant of the reason that intentional training is needed to uncover the beliefs that lie beneath the conscience.

Most recently, the conversations of concern surrounding Social-Emotional Learning, UIR-D funding allocations, and the Student Well-Being vendor guide, were my thousand and one paper cut. The belief that these professional development trainings are “stirring issues of racial divisiveness,” not “positive, inclusive or culturally relevant,” and connected to “critical race theory” rather than professional development for teachers to better understand the students in which they serve, serve as the culminating event that has led to my resignation. I choose to no longer serve in an organization that allows political agendas to drive decisions away from seeing students as their authentic selves, race included, and equipping educators with the tools and language to serve students.

To be clear:

- I remained after only being allowed to have the executive team engage in 4 (60 minute) equity training/discussion sessions.
- I remained after the equity trainings were a place of distraction for a few.
- I remained after my request for an employee allocation for equity was initially vetoed.
- I remained after learning that the planning I was involved in alongside the Teaching and Learning team for the social studies standards review would not be included in the executed plan.
- I remained after not being used as a strategy to speak against HB564.
- I even remained once I realized that the Office of Equity, Inclusion and Opportunities may not be known for an equity-specific initiative.

I ask that as you reflect on just a few of the experiences that I have chosen to share above, I would challenge you to consider:

- (a) Is this good for people of color?
- (b) How does this portray people of color?
- (c) What conclusions are being made about people of color?
- (d) What intersections between race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality can you find and what do they mean?

These questions force society to be examined through the lens and perspective of the person that is viewed as the “other.” I shared my experiences in hopes of providing voice and recognition to others that may have, or currently experience the same things.

The perspective that I have chosen to write from, is not happenstance, but rather called Voice/Counter-Story, a construct of Critical Race Theory. It stresses the importance of examining a societal issue from the perspective of the minority by capturing their lived experience as evidence of an inequity.

The questions I challenged you to consider are the four focus questions of Critical Race Theory.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) examines the experiential knowledge of people of color and their communities related to race and race relations (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). Simplistically put, CRT examines the way in which different races are portrayed, racism as both a group and individual phenomenon, and identifies functions of racism within both institutional and systemic frameworks. CRT emerged from legal studies focusing on the way that people think about privilege, and racial categories. Critical race legal scholarship developed in the 1970s, due to minority

scholars' perception that they were being overlooked in critical legal studies. Furthermore, the theory works towards eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression (Matsuda, 1993).

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced CRT within the educational framework asserting three propositions: race is significant within the United States, U.S. society is based on property rights rather than human rights, and the combination of race and property creates an analytic to understand inequity. Additionally, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explained both the second and third proposition in conjunction with the analysis that property refers to education in both explicit and implicit ways. In a simplistic equation, higher property taxes equal better schools. With the notion that education is a property right, and property rights is a defining component of American society; Critical Race Theory can be applied to understand educational inequities. While some may argue that poor Black children do worse in school, CRT asserts that the cause of their poverty and academic performance is due to the condition of their school and lack of resources as a result of institutional and systemic racism (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995).

Critical Race Theory is not the “boogie-man” that many have attempted to make it to be, it is a theoretical framework that can be applied to assert that it is not that our Black and Brown children are incapable of high-achievement, but rather institutional racism that has led to structural/systemic racism as the cause. Ibram X. Kendi asserts that we often think that racist ideas lead to racist actions, however, racist policies came before racist ideas. Those in power act out of self-interest, thus, they enact racist policies to maintain that power. These policies then result in racial inequities, which lead to the development of racist ideas by others who see these inequities and need a reason to justify why these inequities exist.

I am thankful to have had the opportunity to serve. While I began this journey a year ago believing my legacy would be through an “equity-focused” initiative that would begin to address the inequities within this state, I am now clear that my legacy is refusing to take one more paper-cut, sharing my truth and being committed to my values.

Yours in Education,



Dr. Kelli R. Peterson

cc: Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE)