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EDUCATION

What does Anoka-Hennepin really teach about DEI

A budget impasse triggered by a revolt of three school board members appears to have been averted, but the issue remains. So, see for yourself what it means.

By ABBEY PAYEUR

Matt Audette, a right-wing provocateur elected to Anoka-Hennepin's school board, has recently threatened to obstruct his district's budget unless a list of demands is met. He put it this way in a recent Facebook post: "It is time to put a stop to the spreading of divisive, one-sided views, training, and learning that go against the values and beliefs of many families, students, and staff in our community."

But what does Audette mean when he says current "one-sided views" go against the "values and beliefs of many"? Who is the "one side" and who are the "many"? Audette has claimed current district policies and programs are teaching "divisive, dehumanizing ideologies and world views." In reality, nothing close to that is happening; instead, Audette, and others like him, prey on fear and cause divisions because they fear an end to their dominance in society. Although the three board members recently backed down from their threats to hold the budget hostage ("Anoka-Hennepin district averts shutdown," April 25), it is important to understand their antics as hyperpartisanship that does not contribute to civil dialogue or serve the district's students.

To guard against Audette's unwarranted claims, members of the public should know exactly what Anoka-Hennepin teachers and

leaders are taught and practice that Audette and others decry. They should know what precisely is meant by terms like "diversity, equity, and inclusion" (DEI) and "social and emotional learning" (SEL). Below are several examples of some DEI and SEL training and practices Anoka-Hennepin schools implement and opponents rail heavily against. See for yourself if the following DEI and SEL practices go against your values and beliefs, all of which I have observed either as a parent or as an assistant professor of education who works closely with many school districts across the state:

• **Valuing bilingualism:** Through Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) training, teachers are taught to build upon the first language of multilingual students. Research shows that honoring and building upon the language structures students already have helps students learn both languages more effectively. This speaks directly to one of the goals of DEI — to support students' cultural identities.

• **Integrating multiple perspectives of historical concepts:** As an example, my fourth-grader at Rum River Elementary was taught about the Indigenous people who lived in America before colonization, as well as what brought the colonizers to the continent. They learned that the Indigenous people had structured governments, justice systems and their own cultural norms. Thoughtful, deep engagement with history gives us a chance to think more critically about our past and to learn from mistakes that were undoubtedly made.

• **Co-creating classroom norms and rules:** Teachers are encouraged to set up their classrooms such that student voices are heard and

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necessarily reflect the views of the Star Tribune Editorial Board.

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monstrators made their way to the Sandburg
ication Center during A Youth for Unity rally
d march before an Anoka-Hennepin school
rd meeting on April 22 in Anoka.

nored. For instance, at the beginning of the
ar, many teachers engage students in gener-
ng lists of the types of behaviors that help
m learn best. Students often share what
orks well for them and how they can com-
t to positively contributing to the classroom
mmunity. These are then used to foster pro-
rning community norms.

•**Holding morning meetings:** These are
ed in the younger grades to create opportu-
ies for young children to practice skills like
n-taking, having conversations, and asking
d answering questions. In some grades, this
ucture is also used to discuss challenges the
ss may later experience. Students are invited
share concerns, and then as a community, the
dents and teacher work to solve the prob-
a. This develops important conflict resolu-
n skills key to a democratic society.
You may be thinking, “Yes, but you’ve obvi-

ously cherry-picked these examples.” I have, for
example, skipped a topic many consider to be at
the forefront of what is “wrong with” schools —
the emphasis on the rights of LGBTQ students.
As a former Anoka-Hennepin teacher and cur-
rent parent of students in the district, I can assure
you that the schools are not teaching or encour-
aging your students to “be gay” or to engage
in sexual behaviors. Instead, Anoka-Hennepin
teachers are choosing to support *all* of their stu-
dents, regardless of religion, gender or sexuality.

Supporting all students requires, at literally
the most basic level, that teachers acknowledge
the presence of LGBTQ students and meet their
needs. The reality is that when the LGBTQ com-
munity was not addressed, Anoka-Hennepin’s
LGBTQ students faced extreme harm, some-
times resulting in truly tragic deaths. A school
district’s job is to ensure the safety of its stu-
dents. Teaching tolerance and acceptance of
all students, regardless of beliefs, is not only
morally right, but legally required.

If this type of “DEI” or “SEL” learning goes
against your values as Audette proclaims, I
would urge you to examine your core beliefs.
I am unaware of a moral or faith system that
doesn’t advocate for justice, fairness, reflectiv-
ness and love. These values are at the core of
both DEI and SEL. I encourage you to spend
time in your children’s classrooms. See how
DEI and SEL actually play out in a real context
and not just in the imaginations and hardened
hearts of the fearful on Facebook.

Get involved, then let your school board
members know that you don’t appreciate their
divisiveness and half-truths. We need thought-
ful, open-minded school board members who
take opportunities to learn and to better our
district, not those who hold the district bud-
get — which funds everything from teacher
salaries and classroom supplies to building
maintenance — in limbo over their extreme,
unfounded, radical proclamations. Especially
when they, of all people, have every opportunity
to know and therefore do better.

Abbey Payeur is a professor, an alumna of the Anoka-
Hennepin district and a mom of three kids in district.