

La. college leaders decry legislation

Officials criticize 'racist' inquiry into diversity, inclusion programs

BY JAMES FINN

Staff writer

Top Louisiana university officials on Wednesday decried an effort to have schools report to state education leaders and lawmakers about how diversity, equity and inclusion programs work on college campuses, with one calling the legislation racist before a House education panel.

The measure, backed by some House Republicans as a way to bring accountability to how schools manage diversity-related programs, came amid national scrutiny from conservatives over diversity initiatives and critical race theory.

But Louisiana's House Resolution 13 died on a 5-6 vote by the education panel in the face of criticism from the university leaders and some Democratic lawmakers. They accused the sponsor, Denham Springs state Rep. Valerie Hodges, of failing to define the programs she sought information about.

"At its core, this is a racist instrument," said Monty Sullivan, president of the Louisiana Community and Technical College System.

"Diversity, equity and inclusion are a fact of life. It is a fact in my world, it is a fact in your world," he added. "Some of us have come to realize that already. Others of us have not."

Hodges later accused Sullivan of calling her racist and denied that characterization. Sullivan clarified that his comments were specifically directed at the resolution.

If it had progressed, the resolution would have called on public K-12 schools and universities to submit reports to the Legislature outlining funding, personnel and other elements of programs related to "critical race theory; diversity, equity, and inclusion; or transformative social emotional learning." As a resolution, it would have held no force of law.

Conservative supporters of the resolution told the House Education Committee that it was necessary to find out what diversity, equity and inclusion, and critical race theory programs look like in Louisiana schools.

"Transparency is the key, and knowing what exactly is occurring (with these programs) is very, very important," said Chris Alexander, director of Louisiana Citizen Advocacy Group.

Critical race theory is an educational lens through which racism is seen as systemic in U.S. institutions, which theorists say function to maintain the dominance of White people in society.

Many Republicans view the theory, first popularized in the 1980s, as an effort to rewrite U.S. history and to persuade White people that they are inherently racist and should feel guilty for their advantages.

But the term also has become something of a catchall phrase to describe racial concepts to which conservatives object - something education committee members seized upon as a potential hang-up of Hodges' resolution.

"You're asking for school level reporting on items that have no clear definition of what they are," Rep. Barbara Freiberg, R-Baton Rouge, told supporters of the measure.

So, too, did representatives of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education blast the resolution as overly burdensome for schools, in part because of the lack of clarity around what materials to report.

The resolution did not call for banning any programs or eliminating any school curricula. But it came amid efforts by Republican lawmakers nationwide to exert more control over educational materials, including books containing LGBTQ+ themes and classes about racism.

Hodges struggled to define critical race theory before the committee, but ultimately described it as pedagogy teaching that "one race is superior or inferior to another, or that some people are advantaged because of the color of their skin."

"I think our children need to be taught a patriotic education, and I don't think DEI does that," she said.

Besides Sullivan and BESE, the resolution was opposed by University of Louisiana system President Jim Henderson, a vocal critic of recent efforts by the Louisiana Republican Party to limit diversity, equity and inclusion programs at colleges. State Education Commissioner Kim Hunter Reed also spoke in opposition to the legislation.

Voting to defer HCR 13:

Rep. Patrick Jefferson, D-Homer, Rep. Kendricks Brass, D-Vacherie, Rep. Aimee Freeman, D-New Orleans, Rep. Barbara Freiberg, R-Baton Rouge, Rep. Tammy Phelps, D-Shreveport, Rep. Vincent St. Blanc III, R-Franklin

Voting to keep HCR 13 alive: Rep. Baryl Amedée, R-Houma, Rep. Julie Emerson, R-Carencro Rep. Brett Geymann, R-Lake Charles, Rep. Charles Owen, R-Rosepine, Rep. Phillip Tarver, R-Lake Charles