

Biography

Claire Mengel is a high school student and activist in Cincinnati, Ohio. They are passionate about female empowerment, queer issues, and voter registration. They have been involved with Girl Power Politics, the Hamilton County Commission on Women and Girls, and the Lutheran Church of the Resurrection Reconciling in Christ Team. Claire plans to attend Boston College to study German and Political Science.

Written Testimony

My name is Claire Mengel and I'm from Cincinnati, Ohio. Thank you for inviting me here today and for holding this hearing. I want to tell you about an event my school hosts called Diversity Day and how its cancellation is affecting my peers' education and mental health.

But first, I want you to know two things about me. In my whole life, I have been taught by only one teacher of color: my Mandarin teacher from China, and I live in suburban Cincinnati where just under 90% of my classmates are white.

Diversity Day is a one-day, optional event at Turpin High School in which juniors and seniors watch videos, participate in activities, hear from speakers, and most importantly, participate in discussions. Around 30 students help plan the event and receive training to lead small group discussions. I have been a student leader for 2 years. The content focuses on exposing students to differences in our community. To be clear, Diversity Day does not teach anything about Critical Race Theory (CRT) and students must turn in a permission slip signed by a parent or guardian to attend. The event lasts only one day and unfortunately can barely scratch the surface of the complex topic of diversity. Our goal is just to take the first step and hope some students are motivated to learn more.

As the last bell was about to ring on March 30th, the day before Diversity Day, someone announced over the intercom that Diversity Day had been postponed. We were completely shocked. We had been planning and preparing for the event for weeks and looked forward to hearing from experts from organizations such as the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. We had prepared to miss a day of instruction and had already started our makeup work. The worst thing was that we were not told why it was postponed.

Eventually, we found out that the four newest members of the Forest Hills School Board were responsible. The reason they gave was that our permission slips didn't adequately describe the content of the event to parents, and we needed to send out new permission slips before the event could run.

Students immediately understood it wasn't about the permission slips. These four board members ran together on an anti-CRT platform. I and other student leaders weren't going to accept this excuse. We emailed the board. We expressed our disappointment, our love for Diversity Day, and our confusion at how an event that had been planned for over a month was canceled at the last minute.

Because of the short notice, there was no way to fix the permission slips and have the event on the scheduled day. The event had purposely been scheduled for March 31st, a school day with a shortened schedule, so students missing classes for Diversity Day would only miss 29 minutes of instruction. Many teachers had planned their class to include a silent workday on the 31st so participating students wouldn't miss a lecture. For advanced classes, it would be impossible to do that again. By the time it was canceled, the PTA had already dropped off snacks for the event. It was embarrassing to tell our four guest speakers, all from respected local organizations, that the event to which we invited them weeks before had to be rescheduled, and ask them to clear their schedule for us on a different (but not yet determined) day.

Despite the postponement and our belief that the board had more on their minds than revised permission slips, we refused to give up. We gave the board the benefit of the doubt and we sent out new permission slips - updated to the board's liking. The new slips completely laid out our plan and were able to be analyzed and critiqued by parents and community members. Time was running out in the school year, but we were able to reschedule the event for May 18th.

Then on Sunday, May 1st, the board held a special meeting and canceled Diversity Day. They voted four to zero (Dr. Leslie Rasmussen protested by refusing to participate in the vote) that the event could not happen on school property, during school hours, or use any school funds.

Students and community members immediately took action. We held a peaceful protest outside another special board meeting the next day. When those members snuck in the back entrance to avoid our peaceful protest, we sat with our signs to watch the public portion of the meeting. They refused even to look at us - the students and parents they were elected to serve.

Students took matters into our own hands. On the night before my exam that would determine if I earned college credit for my major at Boston College next year, I planned a protest. I learned how to plan an event for over a hundred students and figured out how to distribute hundreds of t-shirts to students off school property. Those t-shirts were paid for by a community fundraiser. We raised over thirteen thousand dollars, more than double our goal. It is clear that our community, the parents, and the students, support Diversity Day, but the school board refuses to listen.

We decided that if the board wouldn't let us have Diversity Day in school, we would do it ourselves. We planned a shortened version of the event, outside of school hours and not on school property, for May 18th. Because we didn't have a whole school day, we could only ask one of our original speakers and we had to cut many activities and videos.

We decided to hold an event outside of school because it was the only option. But the shortened event pales in comparison to what we originally planned, and an extra-curricular event will not be a viable path forward for Diversity Day in the future. I and other students spent many hours planning this event instead of studying for exams, enjoying senior traditions, and cherishing our last weeks of high school, because of our board's interference. The board's actions have also taken a toll on our teachers and administrators. Our superintendent announced his resignation after the first postponement. This school board will be in charge of appointing our next superintendent, who will control the hiring and firing in the districts. Teachers are scared. I have had teachers whisper to me that they wish they could take a sticker that says "Protect Diversity," but they fear repercussions. Something has gone very wrong when teachers think they will be fired for supporting the concept of diversity.

Like many others, my district is in the middle of a mental health crisis. Seven students have committed suicide since I started middle school. While administrators are doing everything they can to just keep us all alive, this anti-CRT rhetoric by the school board is causing immeasurable stress on our students and staff. My friends are worrying both about the hardest exams we've ever faced and about how to handle adults counter-protesting our student movement. Staff have to walk a tightrope between their genuine support for their students and their fear of losing their jobs. Most critically, students of color are being told by the highest authority in their district that their stories don't deserve to take up school time, school grounds, or school resources. I bring up mental health to remind you that this issue is, in many cases and in many ways, life or death.

I ask you, shouldn't we as students have the freedom to learn in school about different cultures, perspectives, and backgrounds? Our event is not about CRT. Our event is about diversity - learning about it and celebrating it. The school board brought politics into our schools when they attacked our event.

Their actions have harmed our education, our mental health, and our community. I urge you to protect students' opportunity to learn about diversity, and I urge you to listen to student voices.

Thank you for inviting me here.