



**March 15, 2023 - Board Meeting Remarks
John Atkinson, Chairman**

When attacks on diversity and equity are ramping up in various states across the country, we should all be relieved and proud that, in Illinois, everyday we're taking steps toward a more diverse and equitable state.

In no other state are these attacks more blatant and destructive than in Florida. Florida's Governor Ron DeSantis has resorted to implementing a hateful agenda across the state's education system.

DeSantis' Stop WOKE Act prohibits diversity initiatives in the workplace and limits school curriculum that celebrates Black culture. This racist Act is forcing educators to remove books from classroom and library bookshelves for fear of facing retaliation.

DeSantis has also forced the College Board to whitewash its Advanced Placement Black Studies curriculum -- removing books by contemporary thought leaders like Nikole Hannah-Jones and Ta-Nehisi Coates and topics like the Black Lives Matter movement. The updated curriculum does not prohibit teaching about slavery, so the apparent message to students is that it is okay to study racism if we pretend it no longer exists.

DeSantis is bent on taking us backwards. It is not too long ago when segregation in schools in this country was allowed. It is not too long ago when Black and white people couldn't drink from the same water fountains. At a time when all leaders should be making a serious and concerted effort to foster a more just country for everyone, DeSantis is leaning into racist practices of the past, stoking fears, and division for political purposes.

But, we can't pretend that racism is a thing of the past. Not only is it a lie, but it's also just wrong to tell people who experience discrimination because of the color of their skin that what they're experiencing isn't real.

What's more disappointing and frightening is that DeSantis isn't acting alone. He has the support of many Florida state legislators. A few weeks ago, Florida State Rep. Robert Alexander Andrade introduced House Bill 999.

This bill would place the public higher education system under extraordinary state control and out of the hands of educators. In fact, he just appointed a majority board of trustees to Florida's New College, and according to the conservative magazine the *National Review*, DeSantis' chief of staff said that they hoped, and I quote "New College would become the Hillsdale of the South," a reference to a fundamentalist Christian school in Michigan.

This is simply outrageous and, in fact, highlights the hateful and intolerant views that are seeping into the mainstream of our culture. Our higher education system should serve as a buffer against, rather than a catalyst for this throwback agenda.

HB 999 would prohibit public colleges from funding any projects that “espouse diversity, equity, and inclusion or Critical Race Theory rhetoric” no matter the funding source and put faculty hiring into the hands of trustees. This is an egregious attack on academic freedom and the long held principle of shared governance.

The bill also directs trustees to remove from their institutions majors and minors “in Critical Race Theory, Gender Studies, or Intersectionality, or any derivative major or minor of these belief systems.”

In the land of the free and home of the brave, DeSantis has made his state less free for teachers, for women, people of color and LGBTQ people. It appears Florida is home of the brave but not land of the free.

Florida is not alone on this attack on higher education and academic freedom. Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt singled out the state’s two largest public universities “because when we send our kids to college, we expect our tuition to pay for their education, not their indoctrination,” Stitt said. “I want our universities to have less DEI officers and more career placement counselors.”

Well, I have news for both governors. Career success, business success, and DEI are not mutually exclusive, and, in fact, business leaders know that the opposite is true. Diverse teams produce better outcomes. Numerous studies show this to be fact. A recent study by McKinsey of over 1000 companies found that organizations in the top quartile outperformed those in the fourth by 36% in 2017, and these trends are similar when considering both gender and multi-cultural diversity.

A diverse, equitable Illinois is a thriving Illinois. Diverse, inclusive teams make faster, better decisions, and those decisions yield better results for employers. Diversity and equity are good for companies and our economy. But above all else – it is a moral imperative.

We all benefit from a diverse workforce. And to ensure a diverse workforce, we must deliver equitable educational experiences to all students.

We know that inclusive curriculums and classrooms make for better student outcomes, and successful students make our state and our nation flourish.

In Illinois, we understand the value of diversity. We understand the importance of an equitable system of higher education. That’s why our higher education strategic plan explicitly promotes equity in education, and Governor Pritzker has not only made historical investments in this work year after year, but his charge to this board and me when we were appointed in 2019 was to be focused on equity so that every student in our state can thrive.

And guess what? It’s working!

We've seen Black and Latino student enrollment increase at record levels in Illinois when it has decreased nationwide. The governor has increased MAP funding in the FY24 budget to make college more affordable, especially for students from low-income households. The governor also increased funding for the MTI scholarship to recruit and retain teachers of color. All of these are deliberate investments to make progress toward equity.

Inviting students to wrestle with colonialism and slavery in American history is important for the development and advancement of our society. Our students must learn the reality of systemic racism in our society so they can be equipped to extinguish it forever.

We cannot and will not allow the evils of the past to reign again. We have a responsibility for producing educated citizens that are so vital to a healthy democratic society.

We are standing at a dangerous precipice as a nation as certain kinds of political dogma steeped in racism, homophobia, and sexism continue to infiltrate all forms of public education systems across the country.

We cannot, and will not, as a state or here at the IBHE tolerate any attempt to strip anyone of their identity or to erase the complicated and sometimes inconvenient history of our great nation.

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