

Sohya Thomas

○ LD 957 - An Act to Integrate Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander History into the Statewide System of Learning Results

I am submitting this public testimony urging you to pass LD 957.

My daughter is now 14 and has grown up in the Waterville Public School system. She has never learned about Asian American or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander history. Never.

When she was in the 2nd grade, her public school put on what they called an “oriental” play. Oriental is a word that means “foreign” and tied to the language used to justify Japanese American internment. It was removed from all policy documents due to its association with anti-Asian sentiments. This “Oriental” play is called Tikki Tikki Tembo, written by a white woman in the 1960s, and depicts a “funny” story about weird Asian names. My daughter has a South Asian American name—so I went searching for any discussions about this play. I found a blog by Chinese American children’s book author, Grace Lin, who reposted a message by Irene Rideout explaining in a very gentle way how the story “perpetuates the stereotype that Chinese words and names sound like nonsensical syllables.” As Rideout further explains “In 1968, when cultural diversity wasn’t yet the major issue it is today, any book that featured a foreign culture was probably welcomed, even if only for its novelty factor. But now that it’s 2012, and the children’s sections of our libraries are filled with authentic books about other cultures, there is no longer any need to rely on inauthentic tales like Tikki Tikki Tembo as an example of Chinese culture.” I suggested to my daughter’s elementary school that we invite Grace Lin to the school to read from her books. Not to condemn any teacher or the school for the play or use of the term “oriental” but for students to actually learn from Asian American authors.

I was met with hostility.

A few short years ago, a group of middle schoolers formed AAPI Youth Rising and created a pledge for teachers around the country: one/180. 190 is the standard instructional days

on average for schools. And they ask teachers to pledge one—just one—of those days to Asian American/Pacific Islander history. As they write, “Asian American History is American History. Yet only a few Asian American Pacific Islander stories are taught in K-12 U.S. schools. With the increasing awareness of the invisibility of Asian American histories, it’s more important now than ever to hear diverse stories.”

This past weekend I attended the Association for Asian American Studies conference and was very excited to see the organization “Foundations and Futures.” They have created a textbook called “Asian American and Pacific Islander Multimedia Textbook” generated by experts in the field, with a dynamic online platform, textbook adoption outreach, and teacher trainings. So the templates for Asian American instruction, sourced and informed by Asian American scholars, already exist and are easy to implement.

Please pass this legislation.