

Dr. Gene Pfeifer
Submitted to the Administrative Law Judge James R. Mortenson
concerning the Teacher Licensing

I am Dr. Gene Pfeifer, President of Bethany Lutheran College in Mankato, Minnesota. I am writing on behalf of BLC, a college that operates a Minnesota teacher licensure program in good standing, to express our opposition to the proposed revision of the Minnesota Standards of Effective Practice. We are concerned about the potential of one or more of these proposed standards to negatively impact a teacher's ability to continue to believe what is foundational to one's Christian beliefs.

The mission of Bethany states in part ... "Bethany Lutheran College is a Christian liberal arts college owned and operated by the Evangelical Lutheran Synod and committed to the teachings of the Bible ..." Our mission statement continues ... "Bethany Lutheran College provides Christian higher education in a challenging academic environment where personal mentoring guides students to pursue knowledge, truth, and discernment for productive and fulfilling lives."

We believe that one or more of the proposed standards impact our ability to carry out our mission, namely to remain committed to the teachings of the Bible as truth, and therefore impact how we train teachers. Specifically, standard 2D under "Learning Environment" is troubling and in our opinion is unconstitutional and violates a teacher's First Amendment right to free speech.

Our problem with this standard is the use of the verb "affirm." A review of dictionary definitions of that verb show that a common definition is to "state as true" or to "assert to be true." Being compelled or forced to believe something that the Bible doesn't teach as true violates our Christian mission. Furthermore, for an individual to be compelled to assert as true something that one doesn't personally hold to be true is a violation of one's First Amendment right to free speech.

At Bethany, in preparing pre-service teachers to be candidates for teaching in public schools, we certainly concur that future teachers must be prepared to work with all of the students in their classrooms. This includes those who come from the marginalized populations referred to in standard 2D. We understand, and already do teach our pre-service teachers, they need to provide emotional support and encouragement to all of the students in their classrooms in order for each child to have the best opportunity to learn. But to require teacher candidates to "affirm" as true some identities that are contrary to what the Bible teaches (i.e. gender identities that run contrary to the Bible, or other religious beliefs that are contrary to what the Bible teaches) goes too far.

Perhaps the real issue is the verb used in the standard. Understand – yes; provide a learning environment conducive to learning for all children – yes. To affirm as true – no! Again, to compel someone to have to assert something that is against their foundational values as true goes against one's First Amendment right to free speech.

I do notice that all of the verbs in standard 8 on "Racial Consciousness" do use the verb "understand." Perhaps that is the best choice for all standards. We do want all teachers to understand and be knowledgeable of differences in learners, to be encouraging and supportive, and to treat all students with human respect and compassion in order to provide each the best environment for learning.

To compel someone to believe something that goes against their conscience, however, could have the effect of forcing Bible-believing Christian teachers out of public education. Is there no room for a Bible-believing Christian educator in public schools?

Until the 1960's, Bible reading and prayer were in fact common in America's public schools. While the First Amendment prohibits government's sponsorship of religion, it also prohibits government's restriction of religious liberty and free speech.

I'd also like to make one other comment on the proposed standards in general. To us, some of them seem very politically charged. For example, under standard 4 "Planning for Instruction" standard 4E highlights colleges should help pre-service teachers choose "anti-racist" teaching strategies; in standard 4F to highlight resources written and developed by "marginalized" voices such as in regard to "race, ... gender, sexual identity, religion ..."; and in 4H to help teachers create opportunities to learn about "power, privilege, intersectionality, and oppression ... to empower learners to be agents of social change ..." For many years, Minnesota public school teachers have been planning instruction using best practices for all children. Why does planning for instruction now need to become political? Why not simply continue to focus on preparing teachers in Minnesota to make use of best practices to plan instruction that is best suited for all learners in the teachers' classrooms?

Bethany is no stranger to diversity. One in five students on campus come from a foreign country. 37% of full-time students come from non-white backgrounds. We already are preparing future teachers to be sensitive to diversity, as indeed our theology emphasizes what all humans have in common and why all have equal dignity.

At Bethany Lutheran College we will continue train well-qualified teachers for public schools in Minnesota. Our reputation in southern Minnesota and record of success in producing highly qualified and successful candidates for teaching speaks for itself. It is our hope that these proposed standards will not endanger Bethany's education department from continuing to serve well Minnesota's communities.