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SERVICES, INC.

July 7, 2023

Manny Diaz, Jr., Commissioner
325 West Gaines Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0400

Ben Gibson
Chair
Florida State Board of Education
325 West Gaines Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0400

Ryan Petty
Vice Chair
Florida State Board of Education
325 West Gaines Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0400

Dear Commissioner Diaz, Chair Gibson and Vice Chair Petty:

The American Psychological Association respectfully urges you to continue to support Florida students in learning psychology, as defined by psychological science, codified in our APA National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula (American Psychological Association, 2022), and reflected in College Board's Advanced Placement (AP) Psychology course.

We stand with Florida students and their parents who wish to enroll them in AP Psychology, a science-driven curriculum endorsed by educators and experts in the field. We support the College Board in insisting that the AP Psychology course cannot exclude components that are essential, and urge you to reconsider your request to require the College Board to review and, if present, remove important content about sexual orientation and gender identity from its curriculum. We also ask that you revisit your recent decisions to cut these topics from the State of Florida's academic standards for social studies.

The State's recent request and decision are not supported by scientific research or best classroom practices. They will reduce the number of people who can access college credits for psychology in high school and affect pathways for mental health professionals in your state, where students and the broader population desperately need more mental health support. Importantly, if enacted, these changes would reduce the quality of the education these students receive and erase an entire category of people from psychology courses. Furthermore, the right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications was established as a human right by the United Nations in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Taking AP Psychology and the exam is an informed choice that has been made by over 350,000 Florida students and their parents between 2012-2022, accounting for 11% of all exams. A decision that would result in Florida students no longer having the option to take AP Psychology and the exam and would take away parent choice. To alter the way the course is taught and whether the exam can be taken, is taking away choice from parents and options from students. Further, it will add time and costs for college students who would have earned credit through taking an AP course.

The APA is the leading scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States, with more than 146,000 researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants, and students as its members. APA's mission is to advance the creation, communication and application of psychological knowledge to benefit society and improve people's lives. Our comments recognize the Association's broad and diverse membership, which includes students, high school psychology teachers, and psychologists committed to protecting students and ensuring the highest quality of training for future psychologists.

Background

As you know, in April 2023, the Florida State Board of Education voted on [Amendment to Rule 6A-1/09401 Student Performance Standards](#), which removed four benchmarks within the state academic standards for Social Studies in grades 9-12 in accordance with the criteria set forth in s. 1001.42(8)(c)3., F.S., as amended by House Bill 1557 (*prohibits classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in certain grade levels*) in 2022. In May, you sent a letter to the College Board asking for a thorough review of all College Board courses to ensure compliance. The College Board responded on June 15 indicating they would not alter the advanced placement courses and exams to remove content related to sexual orientation and gender identity.

The College Board is correct to take this stand. APA's standards for this content are not new. In fact, APA's National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula, which guide curriculum decisions and instruction for high school psychology classes, have been in use by high school psychology teachers for nearly 25 years. The revised 2014 Next Generation Sunshine State Standards for Social Studies directly used APA's 2011 National Standards. Florida sought to make its standards align with best practices in 2014, but its recent decisions deviate from those practices, disregarding science and student success.

Content is informed by science

The American Psychological Association's National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula have as their foundation that the science of psychology informs the content of the course. Scientific inquiry and research methods are the foundation for content across all units in the standards.

APA's National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula are developed and refined through a rigorous process that considers input from a broad set of stakeholders. High school teachers and college educators serve on the working group. This group is supported by a National Standards Advisory Panel comprised of scientists with expertise in each of the standard domains as well as two K-12 science experts. Feedback is invited and considered before the standards are adopted as APA policy.

Psychology is a hub science that connects to, and can be an entryway into, other STEM disciplines (including statistics, neuroscience, life sciences, and the social sciences). A high-quality high school psychology course can also help prepare students for several growing career fields such as business,

medicine, education, health, and criminal justice.

Why psychology requires the study of gender and sexual orientation

The study of gender identity and sexual orientation is required in an AP psychology course because they are important topics to the field of developmental psychology. There is robust scientific literature on gender identity and sexual orientation. Excluding this content not only deprives students of an understanding of the breadth of psychological science it prevents them from understanding human development and identity.

Psychology, as a discipline and profession, seeks to foster the healthy development of personal identity, which includes sexual orientation and gender identity (American Psychological Association, 2015). Quality psychology curricula incorporate this principle. The understanding of, and engaging in conversations about, gender identity is relevant to all students, as everyone has an identity. Inclusion of identities in the classroom shapes students' understanding of the world (American Psychological Association, 2023). Educational programs that are inclusive and provide opportunities to understand concepts such as gender diversity can benefit all students (American Psychological Association, 2023; Diamond, 2020).

Affirming, inclusive, developmentally appropriate approaches to teaching about human sexuality have been found to be associated with positive outcomes such as appreciation of sexual diversity, dating and intimate partner violence prevention, and development of healthy relationships (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). Removing the study of groups of people is a form of discrimination and we know that discrimination against sexual and gender minority people is associated with higher rates of negative mental and behavioral health outcomes than in the general population (Hatzenbuehler, Phelan & Link, 2013; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Meyer, 2003). Misinformation about human sexuality will thrive if credible sources of information are removed.

Florida urgently needs to grow the pathway of psychologists

Our nation's mental health continues to be in a state of crisis. Data collected by APA show a population experiencing extraordinarily high levels of stress and anxiety, with a quarter of U.S. adults reporting that they are too stressed to function (American Psychological Association, October 2022). Almost three out of four Americans are feeling overwhelmed by the number of crises facing the world right now (American Psychological Association, March 2022). Among children, nationally, nearly 4 million have experienced depression in the last year (Haeffele, November 2022), with diagnoses of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder in children and teenagers increasing 12 percent between 2020 and 2021 (Haeffele, December 2022).

Unsurprisingly, psychologists report that demand for treatment for anxiety and depression remains high, especially among populations of color and young people (American Psychological Association, November 2022). Practitioners are seeing increased workloads and longer waitlists, which have contributed to higher levels of burnout within the profession (American Psychological Association, November 2022). Even before COVID-19, the U.S. was facing a serious nationwide shortage of mental and behavioral health care providers, including psychologists, with every state having documented mental health professional shortage areas (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). It is estimated that 158 million U.S. residents—nearly half of our population—live in a mental health workforce shortage area (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2022). By 2030, these shortages are projected to

worsen significantly (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022; Health Resources and Services Administration, n.d.), with rural communities facing major challenges in recruiting licensed mental and behavioral health care professionals (Rural Health Information Hub, 2021).

Such shortages impact populations across the lifespan. Research shows that while Medicare beneficiaries living in rural areas have slightly higher prevalence rates of mood and anxiety disorders than their counterparts living in urban areas, they are only half as likely to see a mental health specialist (Andrilla, 2021). At the same time, schools continue to struggle to provide these much-needed services. According to data from the Department of Education, more than two-thirds of public schools saw higher percentages of their students seeking mental health services in 2022 than before the pandemic, but only about half reported being able to meet children's heightened psychological health needs (U.S. Department of Education, May 2023). The vast majority of states and districts across the country, including Florida, do not meet the recommended ratios of school-based mental health professionals, including school psychologists (Hopeful Futures Campaign, 2022).

The need for mental health services in Florida is especially high. Nationally, it currently ranks 49th in access to mental health care (Mental Health America, n.d.). The state has 53 designated Mental Health Professional Shortages Areas (HPSA), including 19 of its 67 counties being either a Geographic HPSA or a High Needs Geographic HPSA (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Florida has the second highest percentage of adults in the nation with a mental illness who did not receive treatment in the past year (Masterson and Metz, May 2023), while also ranking 35th in the nation on overall child well-being (The Anne E. Casey Foundation, 2022), and 30th for youth mental health, specifically (Hopeful Futures Campaign, 2022).

To meet this moment and address the mental health needs of all Floridians, it is necessary to take a forward-looking approach that uses every possible pathway to growing a workforce of qualified mental health care providers.

It is ill-advised to limit the education of potential future psychologists that can serve the growing mental health needs in the state.

Instead, policies should expand the ability of young people as early as high school to envision themselves pursuing careers in the mental health fields. High school psychology can be the beginning of such a pathway, encouraging students to consider and/or pursue a psychology major in college. While not all psychology majors go on to pursue advanced degrees in psychology, a subset of those who do will be trained to provide behavioral health services.

About 840,000 graduating high school students in the US earned credit in psychology in high school in 2022 according to data collected by the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress High School Transcript Study (L. Hamilton, personal communication April 20, 2022). A significant proportion of those students are introduced to the discipline through an AP Psychology course. According to the College Board, over 326,000 students took the AP Psychology course in 2023, of whom 28,000 were in Florida, making AP psychology the 6th most popular AP course by exam volume.

Psychology is a discipline that has many applications in society, including mental health services most notably, but not exclusively, and society and the economy will benefit from early education in psychology as a potential career. APA has long supported the teaching of high school psychology,

recognizing the importance of the course in introducing students to valuable skills and content that they can directly apply to their daily lives. Understanding the science of human behavior can help students improve their academic skills, work effectively and collaboratively with others, and successfully navigate daily life challenges. Proposals to remove key scientific underpinnings of the course have the potential to significantly depress its ability to serve as a gateway into psychology, both through a potential decrease in students' interest, as well as a possible loss of recognition for college credits for the AP course.

Conclusion

We respectfully ask you to reconsider your current stance and to support Florida students in learning psychology, as defined by psychological science, codified in our APA National Standards for High School Psychology Curricula, and reflected in College Board's AP Psychology course, in an unhindered manner that allows reference to gender identity and sexual orientation. Limiting access to advance study of psychology at a time of significant mental health needs is disadvantageous to the citizens of Florida. Taking AP psychology is an informed decision. Potentially, not allowing the course and exam is taking away choice from parents and options from students.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration. Please contact Dr. Catherine Grus, Chief Education Officer (cgrus@apa.org) in response to this correspondence.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Arthur C. Evans, Jr.', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Arthur C. Evans, Jr., Ph.D.
Chief Executive Officer

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