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FILE PHOTO

Northland College education instructor Kate Ullman urges Mellen School Board members to repeal a resolution that banned teaching critical race theory and other sensitive subjects in school. The district now is failing to meet state standards on teaching about diversity and Native American culture.

Mellen fails to meet standards on diversity, Indian studies

ASHLAND DAILY PRESS

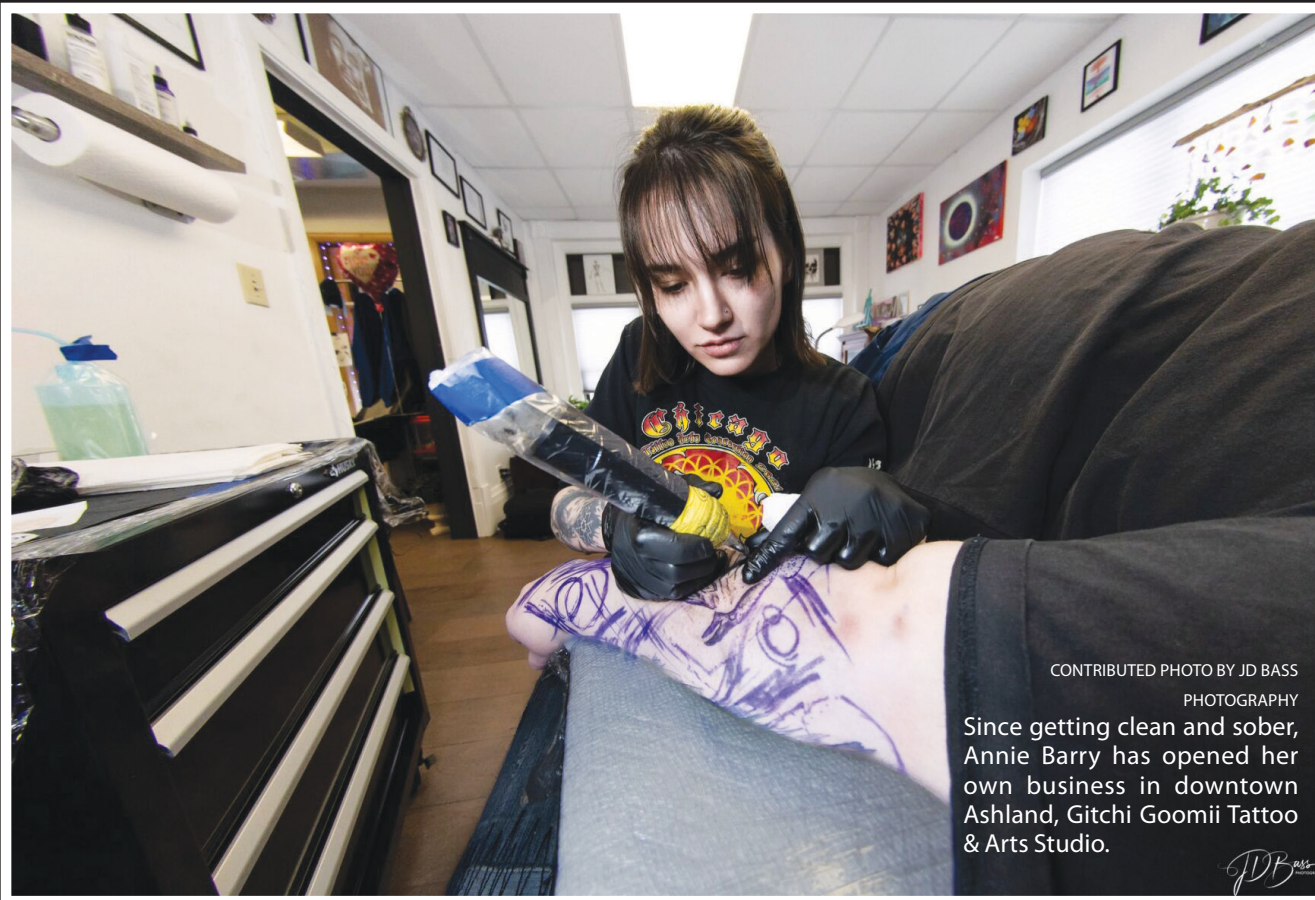
The Mellen School District is failing to meet state standards on teaching students about cultural diversity and Wisconsin's Indigenous people, according to a letter sent this week to the district.

The Department of Public Instruction opened an investigation into Mellen teaching practices in July after a parent filed a complaint with the state, according to the May 22 letter to District Administrator Rhonda Elmhorst-Friemoth.

The letter outlined several meetings DPI officials had with Elmhorst-Friemoth and Mellen staff members in attempts to ensure the district was meeting standards with which every district in the state must comply.

After months of investigation, DPI found the district is failing to teach students and to include in its library and curriculum books that instruct kids on the country's history of diversity and about Wisconsin Indian tribes and bands.

More DIVERSITY | A5



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO BY JD BASS

PHOTOGRAPHY

Since getting clean and sober, Annie Barry has opened her own business in downtown Ashland, Gitchi Goomii Tattoo & Arts Studio.

JD Bass

GETTING SOBER THE HARD WAY

Addicts talk about recovery through the pandemic

TOM STANKARD,
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When Mikey Barri graduated high school, he felt finally free to do whatever he wanted.

Barri was raised in a relatively conservative home in which drugs were taboo. Once out on his own, though,

he started experimenting — and making choices that could have cost him his life.

He started, as most addicts do, with alcohol before moving on to marijuana about six years ago and from there, to harder drugs, always chasing the euphoria he felt when he first started drinking and using.

Over the ensuing three years, as his addiction got worse, his life came unraveled. At the age of 22 he saw what his behavior was doing to the

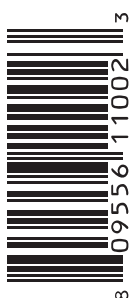
people around him and sought treatment.

“I wanted to stop doing bad things to people. I just made poor decisions that hurt a family member. That was a wake-up call and I wanted to change,” he said.

Barri is among the Bay-Area residents who tried to get clean and sober during one of the most difficult periods in recent history for people seeking recovery.

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SPECIFIC FINDINGS

Among the DPI's findings, according to its report:

- In grades K-12, the district does not provide instructional materials that "reflect the cultural diversity and pluralistic nature of American society."
- "Some specific examples of the deficiency of the evidence provided include: the sixth and seventh grade social studies curriculums provided focused on world cultures without any evidence of how this instruction related back to cultural diversity and pluralism within the US; and the eighth grade curriculum provided related to American history (the colonization of the United States to the Civil War) and did not relate to the diverse and pluralistic nature of our current society," the report said.
- Mellen textbooks don't reflect the cultural diversity of pluralistic nature of American society.
- "With respect to grades K — 8, no evidence was provided regarding texts being used in the classroom," the report said. "Again, evidence was limited to curriculum maps. Further, as detailed above, the curriculum maps provided did not identify evidence relative to the cultural diversity and pluralistic nature of American society."
- Mellen's library doesn't reflect the cultural diversity and pluralistic nature of American society. The DPI review found that 55% of library materials reviewed are so old that they're not relevant or accurate. It also found that Mellen contracts for library services for just 16 days a year, which "limits the opportunity to provide library services to students and staff."
- Mellen social studies programs do not include at least twice in elementary grades instruction on the history of Wisconsin Indian tribes or tribal sovereignty.
- "DPI was able to identify one instance where instruction on instruction on the history of Wisconsin tribes and bands was occurring in the elementary grades: a fourth-grade social studies project which required students to learn about the histories and cultures of one of five Wisconsin tribes and present their findings to the class at large," the report said.

Diversity/from A1

The district will have 90 days to submit to DPI a plan on creating a curriculum that will meet state requirements, the letter says. The district also may appeal the ruling and ask for public hearing on the matter.

Elmhurst-Friemuth did not return calls this week seeking comment.

The complaint was filed last summer immediately after the district held contentious hearings on critical race theory and the school board voted to prohibit teaching CRT in local classrooms. Critical race theory holds that race has played an integral role in shaping American law, politics and culture.

"Asking students for their preferred pronouns verbally or in writing is not acceptable," the policy adopted by the school board says. "The topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion will be taught as general topics and not associated with race, sexual orientation or gender identity. Privilege will be taught as a general topic without being associated with race. Empathy will be taught as a general topic without being associated with privilege, race, sexual orientation or gender identity."

At the time, a handful of Mellen residents, including Nick Vander Puy, raised concerns about the proposal, telling board members that critical race theory is teaching history.

"My concern is that next fall, political science and history (teachers) will be chilled from talking about the things that are still happening. Is this school going to deal with question of social justice? Because what



FILE PHOTO

Mellen's Nick Vander Puy addresses the crowd and Board members during a listening session at which parents railed over sensitive subjects being taught in the district.

I see happening here is that it's not with this ban," he said at a May of 2022 school board meeting.

That fear prompted him to file the complaint with the state.

"I am glad that the DPI took the complaint seriously," he said this week, after the report was issued. "If you remember, Mellen outlawed CRT and came close to banning empathy. That was a red flag for me. I began asking questions about Act 31 and teachers told me they have almost nothing, no teaching about Native Americans other than a skit at Thanksgiving with some pilgrims eating turkey with some Wampanoags out East."

Act 31 is a law passed in 1989, shortly after court rulings recognizing tribal sovereignty, that requires schools in Wisconsin to teach about the 11 federally recognized Indian nations in the state.

At the time, Vander Puy — who is not Native — was a fishing guide in the Minocqua area which gave him a front-row seat at what became known as the "wall-eye wars," in which Natives were targeted and subjected to violence with almost no repercussions as they were spearing fish.

"When that happened, I

took liberty to listen to a traditional man teaching kids in Minocqua. I heard him teach, and they invited kids up to dance and I got up and danced," he said. "I hope someone in Mellen, the school administrator, now takes it upon herself to do

the same thing — to learn. Go to an elder in Bad River and ask, 'How can we connect? How can we teach better? What can we do? How can we live together?'"

Vander Puy said he doesn't blame teachers as much as he blames school board members who have adopted policies making it difficult or impossible for teachers to do their jobs and meet state standards. And he doesn't think it would take a lot to help those teachers.

"I hope this brings some social pressure on Mellen," he said. "I look at what Bayfield is doing, taking kids out in the sugar bush, and Washburn, and taking kids out netting fish. Mike

Wiggins, the Bad River tribal chairman, just gave the commencement address at UW-Superior. Have him come in and do a workshop. Dylan Jennings, the instructor at Northland College who is so active in water rights and wolves, have him come speak. If they did that, I would be tickled silly."

The DPI report also outlined a number of suggestions the state has for Mellen to meet standards — books it can add to its library and curriculum; updating library materials; changes in lesson plans; training for staff members with a DPI expert on American Indian studies and other staff training on equity and diversity.



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May 2023