



STATEMENT BY MPA ABOUT RE-EVALUATION COUNSELING AND THE BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Massachusetts Psychological Association has reviewed with concern accounts of so-called “Re-evaluation Counselling” (RC) as administered to student leaders in the Boston Public Schools (BPS) under a relationship with Youth On Board ^[1](YOB). We understand that many students pressured to participate in the RC program reported considerable emotional distress in a pseudo-therapeutic context by individuals lacking any professional credentials as psychotherapists or counselors. All licensed mental health professionals have a legal and ethical obligation to hold the well-being of our clients paramount and to remain accountable to the public through the licensing process. In addition, we have an ethical obligation to offer evidence-based and scientifically validated treatments.

RC does not qualify as a validated approach to treating psychological and emotional problems. Rather, RC originated with a labor organizer lacking any mental health qualifications. RC flows from a political agenda to address “psychic damage” caused by racism, sexism, classism, and other societal prejudices. Adherents of RC argue that people need “to break through social conditioning” and access “true” emotions ^[2]. As described in the complaints of the students exposed to the program, students were encouraged to share highly sensitive personal information (e.g., their mental health issues, family troubles, and abuse histories) in a group, and to discharge their emotions by crying, yelling, or screaming, with no professional follow-up.

An investigative report for BPS by Dr. Alan Oliff (May 11, 2021) indicates that student leaders were pressured by YOB staff to work on projects directed by YOB to satisfy grants that the agency had received. Clearly, the staff of YOB was seeking to use students to support its organizational agenda, and used emotional stresses and RC to pressure students in that direction. According to Dr. Oliff’s report, every student and many junior staff described pressure to participate in RC. They described the experience as “weird, uncomfortable and cult like.” Students reported feeling manipulated and “pushed” to “get out their emotions by crying, laughing, screaming, whatever they felt they needed to do. This concept of “discharge” was described as an essential piece of the activity and made many students uncomfortable. All of the students reported that parental permission was not obtained.^[3]

The simplistic understanding of human psychology involved in RC and provocative approaches executed by non-professionals encourages practices that generate significant emotional distress without professional support or oversight. Making matters worse, the (BPS) version of the program targeted primarily students of color, who may have had significant vulnerabilities, in the guise of addressing trauma they may (or may not) have suffered. Psychological harm caused by social prejudices, stereotypes, and/or adverse economic circumstances is real and warrants professional intervention, but not with the simplistic tools comprising RC and offered by Youth On Board whose personnel lack meaningful psychotherapy credentials or obligations to mental health care consumer protection agencies.

The Massachusetts Psychological Association strongly supports BPS Superintendent Brenda Cassellius’s decisions to end its relationship with Youth On Board and limit future counseling initiatives to licensed professionals. We also support the efforts of Suffolk District Attorney Rachael Rollins to continue looking into the allegations made by students, and consider

whether child endangerment prosecution is warranted against the individuals involved in causing emotional distress to students in the name of counseling.

[1] Youth On Board, a 501(c) (3) organization was granted tax-exempt status by IRS in February, 2021, listing its headquarters at a private residence in Cambridge. CharityNavigator.org has posted an advisory on the organization as a result of recent developments.

[2] Aubry, T. & Travis, T. (2015) Rethinking Therapeutic Culture. Chicago: University of Chicago. DOI: 10.7208/Chicago/9780226250274.001.0001

[3] Investigation Report on the Boston Student Advisory Council by Dr. Alan Oliff, May 11, 2021



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Resources:

https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/03/06/metro/adult-supervisor-bps-student-group-accused-news-conference-psychological-abuse/?p1=Article_Inline_Related_Link

https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/05/24/metro/boston-superintendent-announces-changes-after-investigation-finds-students-pressured-into-unlicensed-counseling/?p1=Article_Inline_Text_Link

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/05/26/metro/inside-unlicensed-counseling-that-led-boston-students-allege-emotional-abuse/>

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/07/08/metro/organization-calls-boston-students-sharing-their-unlicensed-counseling-experiences-an-attack/>

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