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Opponent Testimony on HB 322
Ohio House State and Local Government Committee
September 19, 2021

Chair Wiggam, Vice Chair John, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the committee, thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Richard Fletcher, I am a British-born US citizen, Ohio voter, associate professor at The Ohio State University in the Department of Arts Administration, Education, and Policy, and the proud parent of a child who just started in the new Columbus City Schools World Language Middle School. I am here today to offer my testimony in strong opposition to HB 322.

As an American citizen and Ohioan (I have lived here in Columbus for all of my 15 years in the US), as an educator and a father, I oppose this bill because it represents a dangerously reductive and divisive fantasy of America that is opposed to the complex and diverse reality of the America that we live in today.

While I oppose the bill for many reasons, allow me to focus my testimony on one that particularly undermines my work as an educator and as a father of a Middle Schooler: the bill's rejection of teaching individual responsibility for actions committed in the past.

As part of my work in the College of Arts and Sciences Curriculum Committee at Ohio State, I am the chair of the panel on Race, Ethnic and Gender Diversity for the foundational level of courses for the new General Education Requirements that will be implemented in the next academic year. My colleagues and I on the panel review courses that teach how historically and socially constructed categories of race, ethnicity, and gender shape perceptions, individual outcomes, and broader societal, political, economic, and cultural systems. As foundational for every student at Ohio State, we hope that our new Diversity requirement will also be taken up at the High School level in Ohio. However, this bill would make this beneficial alignment of High School and College curriculum impossible for a variety of reasons, but specifically through its blanket denial that the past continues to inform lived experiences of race, ethnicity, and gender. Allow me to offer a concrete example.

One way we on the panel are implementing these goals beyond the specifics of course focus, content, and assignments, is our requirement that each course includes a land acknowledgement – a brief statement that explicitly recognizes that the land the university occupies is the ancestral and contemporary territory of several Indigenous nations and peoples, as well as the historical contexts that have and continue to affect the Indigenous peoples in the US. The land acknowledgment is an ongoing negotiation of the past in the present in terms of a shared commitment and responsibility between settlers - both individuals and institutions - and Indigenous communities. This bill not only undermines the very existence of land acknowledgment as a reconciliatory process in the present, but also the basic facts of our nation's history. The history of the United States is the history of settler colonialism. As a white man, born in the UK to English and Scottish parents, part of what makes me an American is the fact that, like many white Europeans before me, I have settled here in Ohio to seek a better life. In fact, I recently connected with a family member who settled in Ohio from Scotland back in the 1950s! However, unlike my ancestors, I have not personally participated in the violent, forced

removal of the Indigenous peoples of this land that we here now call home. That was what the academic Patrick Wolfe calls the ‘frontier’ phase of settler colonialism and presumably this is among the actions in the past that this bill does not want me as a white male settler to think I have any responsibility for. Yet, land acknowledgments, while often referencing this earlier phase of violent removal, operate today within another, different phase of settler colonialism. A land acknowledgment is a statement that registers – here and now - that there are ongoing structures of settler colonialism – legal, political, economic, and cultural – that continue to undermine the presence and flourishing of Native Americans within US society today. For example, while every student at Ohio State benefits from the original land-grant program initiated by the Morrill Act of 1862 that allocated expropriated Indigenous land for the capital to create public universities, what are the institution’s responsibilities to Indigenous students within this same university? Are our students who descended from settlers individually responsible for their ancestors’ forced removal of Indigenous students’ ancestors from their land and the land-grab that enabled the endowment of the university they study at? No, they are not. But they are individually responsible for learning and understanding this history, as well as the full range of American diversity that not only includes, but also celebrates the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples today.

What appealed to me when I first arrived in this country, and even inspired me to become an American citizen, was how, in spite of the glaring historical and structural inequalities that have attempted to divide Americans, it is an embrace of diversity that unites them today. Diversity through unity and not the division that this bill would embolden, demands that we continue to educate ourselves and our young people about our shared responsibility as individuals to remember the violent segregations and erasures of our fellow Americans in the past. As announced in the title of the book by Indigenous scholar Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future*, I want my students and my son to be a part of a future that does not forget the realities of this nation’s past, but which also rejects a new frontier of a fantasy America built on forgetting, fear and division that this bill is setting in motion.

I urge you to vote NO on this bill. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any additional questions or provide input as needed.

Respectfully submitted,

Richard Fletcher

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