

Good afternoon Chairman Wiggam and members of the State and Local Government Committee. My name is Meg Bennett and I live in Shaker Heights. I am part of the group Honesty for Ohio Education, and the co-founder of the Honesty for Ohio Education Youth Coalition. I'm here to share why I strongly oppose House Bill 322 and Sub House Bill 327.

House Bills 322 and 327 are a serious threat to honesty in education. If passed, Ohio educators who critically examine our country's history will be punished, which completely undermines the learning environment. As the daughter of a history teacher, I know the threat of educators having their licenses revoked for violating these bills is terrifying. Teachers striving to teach an honest and accurate portrayal of history should be uplifted, not under threat. These bills prevent our educators from teaching the truth, while causing them to enter school in fear about what they are allowed to teach and discuss with their students. Students cannot be taught an honest and accurate education in Ohio if these bills are passed.

Honesty in Education matters to me because I believe that the classroom should be an environment where students of all identities and backgrounds can have conversations where they learn from each others' experiences and viewpoints. Classrooms should be a place of non-judgement and empathy where students can be themselves without fear.

I remember back in first grade my teacher held up two eggs; a white egg and a brown egg. She asked us what the difference between the eggs was, and we said the color. She then cracked the eggs into a bowl so we could just see the yolks, and asked us which was the white egg and which was the brown egg. We explained that we couldn't tell the difference anymore because both eggs looked the same inside. My teacher told us that it's the same for people – no matter our race we are all the same inside. By bringing attention to our differences, my teacher gave us all a new perspective which brought us closer together, not apart. My teacher used a

developmentally appropriate activity to start a conversation in the classroom about our racial identities in a safe and constructive way, and it was a way of building community and trust.

As a student, one of my, and my peers', favorite activities to engage in is debates in history class. I think back to my AP US History class when we were split into groups to represent the different candidates of the 1912 election; or in European History when we had to argue which country it was best to be a woman in after WWII. I was assigned to the China team which was challenging since we had to fight off attacks about footbinding and female infanticide, but we learned the values of another culture. My classmates and I had to dig deep into the history to make our case. Debates like these developed our empathy, critical thinking, reasoning, and social-emotional skills. If HB 327 passes, these debates will no longer be possible since HB 327 specifically prohibits "requiring a student to advocate for or against a specific topic or point of view."

At Shaker Heights High School we have a student organization called SGORR, the Student Group on Race Relations. SGORR visits 4th, 6th, and 8th grade classrooms three times per year to engage students in activities about race and seven other social identifiers: ability, age, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status. I always enjoyed when SGORR visited my classroom because it provided me with an opportunity to connect with my classmates on a deep and personal level. My peers and I felt comfortable to share our stories with each other and to get to know each other better. So, once I reached high school I joined SGORR, and in my senior year I became a SGORR leader. My partner and I ran meetings of about twelve high school students. Our meetings were the highlight of my week since I appreciated having a safe space where we could discuss current events.

One of my favorite activities to lead when we visited the 4th and 6th grade classrooms is called Step into The Circle. The leader read various prompts, and if the statement applied to a student, they stepped into the circle. It's a silent activity beside the reading of the prompts, so the students feel safe and unjudged to be their authentic self. Some examples of the prompts are:

“Step into the circle if you have friends of a different skin color from you.”

“Step into the circle if you've ever been treated differently because of your race.”

When a White student sees all their Black classmates step into the circle after being asked if they have been treated differently because of their race, and no White students enter the circle, the students develop empathy and a better understanding of people different from them. SGORR has created such an enriching space in our community, but I can't see it being able to continue if these bills are passed. Having conversations about race in a developmentally appropriate manner is key to developing a child's empathy and understanding of the world around them. HB 322 and 327 would harm students, educators, families, and the state of Ohio because they prevent an eye-opening, empathy-developing, and honest education.

I believe that students across Ohio should continue to benefit from honest education, since learning about the truth teaches us how to be open minded and engaged citizens; thus I urge you to vote against these bills.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective, and if you have any questions please email me at mbennettlondon@gmail.com