

“Silences impacting Ohio students” -HB322
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My name is Derek Burtch and I am here in my capacity as a teacher, a parent, and co-creator of the educational nonprofit Erase the Space. Of these three identities, I have held the title of teacher the longest. I am in my 14th year teaching in the state of Ohio having spent 6 years at North Union High School in Richwood, 7 years at Olentangy Liberty High School in Powell, and am currently teaching at Olentangy High School in Lewis Center. My son will turn two in November, so I am still very much learning what it means to be a parent.

Five years ago, a colleague at South High School in Columbus and I created a collaborative project for our students. I was teaching at Olentangy Liberty High School, and we both realized that our students were never going to meet each other. In fact, things were set up in a way that they were not supposed to meet each other. And if they did, it would be in fraught situations without knowledge of each others' context or lives. As we worked to create a learning experience that served both groups of students, we quickly realized this problem of segregated discourse was not just an issue facing our students, but our friends, families, and co-workers. I was researching democratic discourse at the time, and we decided to center our learning exchange around the idea of discourse across difference.

We asked our students to introduce themselves in a way that felt comfortable to them, they were partnered with a student in the other class, and, throughout the year, they discussed their learning together. The exchange ultimately ended in an in-person experience to collaborate on a project. All of the students worked together, and some were very picky about their final product. We only gave them poster board, markers, glue, scissors, and other hands-on crafty things because we wanted them to have to interact. “Pass me the glue.” “What should go here?” We didn't want them retreating to their phones. But the collaborative creation wasn't the focus; the words they gave to each other through shared learning were the focus.

My students walked into the meeting room at the downtown Columbus library after the students from South High were already there. For a few moments there was an uncomfortable tension, and then an explosion of conversation. Students who had been communicating all year finally got to meet each other. As the three-hour window came to a close, both my colleague and I debriefed with our students. We asked them, “Should we do this again?” All of my students-- who showed up to this after their last final was given, literally on the last day of school--said yes and gave different reasons. Every student from South High said the same thing. Even students that didn't necessarily vibe with their partner said they understood why this experience was important and that it should happen again.

This classroom exchange and the others that happened in subsequent years would most likely not have happened under the language of HB327 and definitely would not have happened under the language of HB322. The shared learning and collaborative projects in which our

students engage revolve around a social issue facing both groups of students which involve the investigation of uncomfortable history. They are asked to discuss pressing social issues like modern school segregation, revising the list of texts offered in classes, and what it means to be an American living in a region with inequality manufactured by public policy (proposed revision 3313.6027 (B)(3)).

We have researched our methods with accredited partners, listened to students, and collaborated with community educators to continue honing our practice to support teachers and students in the hopes of creating opportunities for students to learn essential knowledge together in a more challenging way than traditional classroom learning (Sec 3301.079 (A)(1)) in order to prepare students for postsecondary instruction and the workplace (Sec 3301.079 (A)(1)(a)(i)). Our methods involve students navigating different rhetorical situations: print, online, and in-person discourse. We do this to engage students in the literacies of information, media, and technology (Sec 3301.079 (A)(1)(a)(ii)) to experience learning through project-based and real world opportunities (Sec (A)(1)(a)(iii)).

One of our students from the first year of our exchange program wrote this during her first year at Yale University, “As a freshman in high school, I participated in the first-ever exchange that Erase the Space organized. Four years later, I still remember that exchange and, later, my involvement in the organization as some of the most fulfilling experiences of my time in high school. Erase the Space provided me with an opportunity to deeply engage with issues such as school segregation that I would have only learned about on a surface level otherwise. The program empowered me to tackle other issues facing my local community, and the ability to have a meaningful discussion is a valuable skill I carry with me to this day.” This student also went on to create the Columbus Civic and was a featured speaker for TEDx Columbus in 2019.

This type of life-long learning through essential knowledge and skills (Sec 3301.079 (A)(1)(a)(iv)) is not possible under the proposed revisions in HB322 and 327.

These bills exemplify the words of historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “When reality does not coincide with deeply held beliefs, human beings tend to phrase interpretations that force reality within the scope of these beliefs. They devise formulas to repress the unthinkable and to bring it back within the realm of accepted discourse.” Our students, and many students across Ohio, are yearning for an opportunity to learn about the “divisive concepts” laid out in these bills.

Do we suppose teachers are to play the role of entertainers, to sanitize the truth in the name of comfort, or are we to help students be critical thinkers? Learning isn’t always comfortable. In fact, I argue that true learning never is.

These bills are not based on research or evidence, but on an already accepted way of organizing the world, something students should have the opportunity to learn about and challenge. The reaction shown in these bills are to realities that some claim are unthinkable. Our students want and deserve the chance to think about these “divisive concepts” and decide for themselves.

Statistics from the American Historical Association (Founded in 1884 and incorporated by Congress in 1889 for the promotion of historical studies, the American Historical Association provides leadership for the discipline and promotes the critical role of historical thinking in public life.) to exemplify that people want to learn about these topics. The study was published on August 30, 2021 (1,816 people surveyed):

- 73% are drawn to history that challenges what they know compared to 27% prefer history that reinforces what they know
- 59% of Republicans and 80% of Democrats are drawn to history that challenges what they know compared to 41% of Republicans and 20% of Democrats that prefer history that reinforces what they know
- Between fact-based and inquiry based approaches to teaching history, 9% said they are encouraged to learn more and 91% are discouraged from learning more in fact-based history pedagogy whereas 68% said they were encouraged to learn more compared to 32% that were discouraged within inquiry-based historical pedagogy
- 89% said that knowledge of others is just as important as knowledge of their own racial or ethnic community compared to 11% stating that knowledge of their own racial/ethnic community is more important
- 75% of people ages 18-29 stated that learning about distant history is just as important as learning about recent historical events compared to 25% that stated learning about recent history is more important
- 62% stated that knowledge of history should change
 - 61% believe that happens when new information becomes available
 - 16% believe that happens when people's values change
 - 8% believe that happens when historians ask new questions
 - 15% believe that happens through the influence of political agendas
- 77% believe it is acceptable to teach history about harm done to others even if it causes discomfort as compared to 23% who believe teaching about the past shouldn't make people uncomfortable even if it is about harm done to others
 - 74% of respondents who identify as Republicans believe it is acceptable to teach history about harm done to others even if it causes discomfort
 - 78% of respondents who identify as Democrats believe it is acceptable to teach history about harm done to others even if it causes discomfort
- 90% of respondents reported their action taken when encountering uncomfortable history is to investigate it further as compared to 10% who say they would avoid further investigation