

Testimony Against HB 322 & HB 327

Good afternoon Members of the House State and Local Government Committee. Thank you for allowing me to give testimony in opposition to House Bill 322 and House Bill 327.

My name is Malia Lewis. I am Vice President of the Board of Education of the Cleveland Heights-University Heights City Schools. The last couple of times I have been to Columbus, I have not testified myself, but have brought students from Cleveland Heights High School and Roxboro Middle school so that they could give testimony in the Statehouse on topics which affect them. Today's hearing was announced too short notice for our students could to get out of class in order to be here in person. So –in their absence– I will do my best to represent their interests.

HB 322 seems to break down into 3 parts, disallowing “controversial” subjects, punishing classroom advocacy, and preventing policies which accommodate multiplicity or fluidity of genders or “like ideas.” That last section is awfully specific given the broader nature of the rest of the bill.

1. “Controversial” subjects also referred to “prohibited” concepts

Under HB 322, teachers cannot be required to teach current events or “widely debated and currently controversial issues of public policy or current affairs”. In fact, this means that Local School Districts would be prevented from choosing their own curricula or other teaching materials if they cover any “controversial issues”. The United States of America is a sufficiently diverse, complicated, and interesting place to live that the Federal Government does not determine what is taught in school or how it is taught; each state does that. Ohio is a sufficiently diverse, complicated, and interesting place to live that the State does not determine what is taught or how it is taught. The State Department of Education sets content standards and leaves the details of curriculum and implementation to local Boards of Education. I was elected by my community to determine which curricula would meet both the needs of my community and its students **and** the requirements of the Department of Education. Not you.

Back in the day, students were required to watch the nightly news on television so they could discuss current events in Social Studies class. Such current events as the Apollo moon landing in July of 1969; or the Space Shuttle Columbia explosion in January 1986; or the World Trade Towers attack in September 2001. Students were expected to read the newspaper (remember newspapers?) to learn to distinguish between facts and opinions. Now they watch clips on YouTube and scroll their Twitter feeds in order to learn the same skills.

But the fundamental principles are the same: it is to the benefit of society as a whole for students to learn about current affairs and become active, engaged citizens. You were elected by active, engaged citizens who thought you would make the world a better place for them and their local communities. Do not hamper the learning of future voters by outlawing anything which provokes disagreement, which provokes discussion, which provokes discovery, and yes

which might provoke discomfort. For disagreement, discussion, discovery, and yes discomfort in turn provoke growth, engagement, and democracy.

2. Classroom advocacy

Under HB 322, schools are prohibited from requiring or offering any coursework, projects, or activities involving lobbying for any legislation; social or public policy advocacy; or working with any organization or group that lobbies for legislation or works on social or public policy.

Under HB 322 students like those brave Tigers who came to testify on behalf of better funding for public school districts would be prohibited from receiving academic credit for researching a pending state bill, writing and editing their thoughts on that bill, practicing public speaking with each other, and coming to the Statehouse to exercise their lawful right to speak to their elected representatives (ok, elected by adults, not necessarily by them). How dare you curtail the democratic process with a bill such as this.

3. Gender Pronouns

Under HB 322 schools would be prevented from expecting teachers to recognize the preferred gender identities and use the preferred pronouns of students in their classrooms. That is a far cry from refusing to call my colleague Superintendent Elizabeth Kirby by her preferred nickname Liz. That is like allowing a teacher to say: I don't like your name Malia, it is too hard for me to pronounce correctly, so I choose to call you Anne instead.

It is no skin off a teacher's nose (or a politician's nose for that matter) whether a particular student identifies as female, male, or non-binary. A teacher cannot effectively help a student learn, and grow into an engaged citizen if that teacher refuses to see each student as an individual with agency and preferences.

Add something to wrap up this section and use the word democracy again...

In the interests of time, I will summarize HB 327 as being all about "divisive concepts": it prohibits teaching "divisive concepts", awarding academic credit for coursework involving "divisive concepts", applying for grants to teach about "divisive concepts", or spending money public or private on a course which teaches about "divisive concepts". And on and on.

What are you so afraid of? That we may have differing opinions, that we hear opinions we disagree with, that we may engage in intellectual debate? If we do not learn about, analyze, consider, refute, debate divisive concepts, then they do not exist, right?

Today I want to focus on just one small part of HB 327: HB 327 outlaws requiring a student to advocate for or against a specific topic or point of view for credit. In other words, HB 327 prohibits **academic debate** for course credit. **Really?** How many of you participated in a debate program in high school? Debate is the first training ground for future lawyers and judges, for

future scholars of philosophy and history, for future politicians such as yourselves. Passing this bill will assure that Ohio **never** sends a high school student to a Harvard Debate Council summer workshop. Passing this bill would ensure that Ohio regresses to the state of an intellectual swamp: muddy, smelly, and unfit for cultivation.

The motto of this country is E Pluribus Unum --Out of Many, One. It is not: Eradicate the Many That All Become the Same. It is not: Muzzle the Many that Only One Voice Be Heard. It is not: Of Many Ideas, Only Allow the One I Agree With to Remain. There have been instances in literature which explored those alternate mottos and instance in history where those alternate mottos were implemented. If you remember reading Aldous Huxley or George Orwell, you may remember that those stories did not turn out so well. If you remember studying the Russian Revolution of 1917 or the rise of the Khmer Rouge in the 1970's you may remember that they did not turn out so well either.

Our democracy was founded on a plurality of ideas. Please do not limit the ideas we teach in public schools and universities. Our democracy depends on maintaining that plurality of ideas.

Thank you.