

Opponent Testimony for House Bill 322 and House Bill 327

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House State and Local Government Committee
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Chairman Wiggam, Vice Chairwoman John, Ranking Member Representative Kelly, and Members of the State and Local Government Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Cynthia Peeples and I speak on behalf of the League of Women Voters of Ohio. I currently serve on the State Board of Directors, and the League's State Board Advocacy and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committees. I also chair the League's Northeast Ohio Real Talk program, which examines issues of inequity and discrimination in education, public health, criminal justice, and democracy. As a 100-year old nonpartisan voting rights advocacy organization that empowers and educates voters of all stripes and political affiliations, League believes that honesty in education is the bedrock of a high-functioning democracy. **As such, the League of Women Voters of Ohio strongly opposes House Bill 322 and House Bill 327.**

Honesty in Education is the complete presentation, thorough examination, and acknowledgement of historical and current events, behaviors, and societal trends. It reflects and affirms diverse perspectives and identities, including race, sex, and faith. It is grounded in credible research, widely-accepted sources, and integral narratives of lived experiences. It promotes open dialogue, debate, and advocacy. Honesty in Education develops lifelong learners and engaged citizens who address complex issues, seek collaborative solutions, and help advance society.

The Ohio League, with its 34 Local Leagues representing some 3,600+ members across the state, opposes bills and efforts that seek to restrict, censor, and prohibit the honest, accurate, and inclusive examination and acknowledgment of how racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and intersecting forms of discrimination have shaped American and Ohio history, and how those legacies

continue to inform our representative democracy, voting rights, district maps, government institutions, legislation, systems, policies, leaders, and personal beliefs. We oppose bills that prohibit or limit the complex understanding of why the state of Ohio, on average, votes 55% Republican and 45% Democrat, yet the Ohio Redistricting Commission recently awarded 62 (63%) seats to House Republicans and 23 (70%) to Senate Republicans¹; why Ohio's K-12 school population is 30% students of color, yet only 6% teachers of color²; why the Ohio prison population is 45% Black yet the state population is only 13% Black³; why Ohio's Black maternal and infant mortality rate consistently lead all maternal and infant mortality rates in Ohio, with Black infants nearly 3 times more likely to die than white infants⁴; and how policies of redlining Black communities through 1968 contributed to Cleveland ranking as one of the top 10 most segregated cities in the country⁵.

The League not only objects to the restrictions that hobble the teaching, curricula development, professional development, and funding necessary to examine and acknowledge these and other undeniable truths, we are especially concerned with the deliberate vagueness and opaque language defining what qualifies as a violation of House Bill 327. The excessive penalties imposed for said ambiguous violations, such as revoking professional licenses, withholding 100% of state funding, denial of tenure, and civil action suits against teachers, wreak of an authoritarian effort to threaten and intimidate educators away from the truth and, by extension, their students. These truths are necessary to address complicated issues impacting livelihood and survival, and build pathways for sustainable collaborative solutions. This bill openly legislates the weaponizing of school funding and professional careers to disempower educators, students, and entire communities. These aggressive tactics against education and truth have no home in a 21st century democracy that champions quality education, civil and human rights, and multiculturalism.

While both bills also undermine the realization of an inclusive democracy, HB 322 goes further by discouraging and discrediting student civic engagement and advocacy. This restriction in itself is concerning coming from an elected official. Civil servants and educators should encourage students to lean in to our legislative process; to engage in decennial Census reporting and learn how that data impacts apportionment, and how community-led activism can bear out constitutional reforms for fair district maps; to learn about the Legislative Services Commission and use of their comprehensive legislation analyses to lobby for or

against bills in legislative committees; to encourage and reward students for meeting with their county or city council members; and to reward students who meaningfully organize and advocate around policies that lift their communities. These exercises are the hallmark of a vibrant democracy, and the purest form of patriotism. Legislation that pushes students away from democracy rather than towards it, is a stain on this Statehouse. Citizens with a singular, myopic, nationalistic understanding of history, government institutions, power dynamics, and elected leaders are hard-pressed to critically engage in national, state, and local policy issues that extend beyond their own experience, race, or zip code. They become disenfranchised with the system or fall prey to candidates married to their party, divorced from their constituents. Democracy is an ongoing exercise that requires honest education, constant scrutiny of institutions, systems and leaders, and active engagement at every level.

Each of you, as respected elected leaders in your districts, and giants in this storied house, have a pivotal opportunity to leverage your position, your expertise, and your wisdom to raise the bar for Ohio's education, not lower it. You can demonstrate how to push back against extremist, copycat legislation and bravely move our students, our educators, our families, and our state into an honest approach to education that does not run from the past, but boldly runs towards it... to learn, reconcile, repair, grow, and finally heal. **Ohio can be a leader across the nation in this regard, if you allow it.**

The League of Women Voters of Ohio asks you to strongly consider this testimony opposing HB 322 and HB 327 and vote NO on these bills.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any additional questions or provide input as needed.

Respectfully submitted,

Cynthia Peeples
Director, State Board of Directors
League of Women Voters of Ohio

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