

5/9/2023

**Ohio House Primary and Secondary Education Committee**

House Bill 103 Interested Party Testimony

American Historical Association

Chairman Bird and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit interested party testimony regarding House Bill (HB) 103. The American Historical Association (AHA) wishes to express grave concern about a measure that would inject politics into the process of drafting state history and social studies learning standards.

Ohio does not need a new, politically appointed task force “to produce statewide academic standards in social studies.”

The state [Department of Education already does this work](#)—and does it well—in accordance with widely recognized professional norms codified in the [AHA’s criteria](#) on state standards revision. The creation of this new body sidesteps both professional staff at the Ohio Department of Education and the 19 members of the State Board of Education, 11 of whom are elected. Few Ohioans will agree with the premise that the state needs more bureaucracy. Fewer still are likely to support the idea that yet another board with an unambiguously political mandate would streamline the already complicated process of crafting education policy.

What’s more, HB 103 singles out the American Birthright model standards as the basis for a radical overhaul of history and social studies education in Ohio. These standards are not the product of an evidence-based study; they are merely a risky, untested document that, if they were adopted, would impose wrenching opportunity costs on Ohio students, parents, teachers, and schools.

Emphasizing content in place of critical thinking, American Birthright focuses narrowly on lessons about how students should feel about the United States. The AHA is not opposed to history education with a patriotic bent. But patriotism does not require sacrificing the complexity, contingency, and conflict that produced our world; instead, the version of history here is distorted and flattened, resulting in a narrative in which neither the US nor Europe ever change in any meaningful way. For example, American Birthright ignores emancipation and the eventual abolition of slavery among the “various effects of the Civil War.” This is the kind of intellectual contortion required to support the contention that the US is and always has been perfect. And world history, by this dangerously Victorian reckoning, is reduced to a sideshow about the “civilizing process,” in which “warlike” non-Western societies gradually give way before the unrelenting march of “civilization.” Without ever meaningfully engaging with any evidence to the contrary, American Birthright offers a pleasant fantasy in which European empires merely “united largely separate regions and gave birth to new nations in the Americas and Australasia.” At a time when Ohio should be offering its students the best and broadest educational opportunities to

stay competitive in the world economy, these standards instead have the potential to hobble students with a parochial worldview and deprive them of the chance to become tomorrow's global leaders.

Whatever the merits or flaws of American Birthright, however, this is a bill that undermines professional history education in Ohio. It would create an entirely new bureaucratic apparatus as a strategy for overruling an open, democratic, and professional process simply because this bill's sponsors did not get to dictate the terms of history education in the state through established channels. Ohio's students deserve better.

Thank you for your consideration of the AHA's perspectives on HB 103 and the supremely important issue of history learning standards in public education.

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The AHA is America's largest and oldest organization of professional historians, with over 11,000 members engaged in the teaching and practice of history at colleges and universities, secondary schools, historical institutes, museums, and other institutions. The AHA membership represents every historical era and geographical area. Founded in 1884 and incorporated by Congress in 1889 for the promotion of historical studies, the Association provides leadership for the discipline, helps to sustain and enhance the work of historians, and promotes the critical role of historical thinking in public life. Everything has a history.