



Proponent Testimony of: Victoria Hickcox
House Bill 171
December 11, 2023

Good afternoon, Chair Bird, Vice Chair Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee. My name is Victoria Hickcox, and I am the Outreach Director at the Ohio Chapter of the Council on American Islamic Relations—known as CAIR-Ohio. CAIR-Ohio is a civil rights and advocacy organization that combats Islamophobia and uplifts the Muslim community. I also testify as a former middle school teacher and as a community educator, asking this committee to support House Bill 171—to update the social studies model curriculum to reflect Ohio’s diverse communities.

HB 171 will benefit both educators and students of all backgrounds by requiring the inclusion of diverse histories, stories, and societal contributions of various groups into the curriculum. Often children of underrepresented groups feel left out in their schools, leading to mental health issues and bullying. To provide all students with a high-quality education, this bill aims to integrate lessons on the history of migration, lived experiences, and contributions of a range of communities in the social studies model curriculum. This includes the vast history of Muslims in the U.S., since before its founding.

According to a recent study conducted by the Institute for Social Policy & Understanding, Muslims are the most diverse faith group in the country, which certainly rings true for the Muslim community in Ohio. Muslims in Ohio are estimated to be around 230,000+ and is growing rapidly. Muslims work in a wide range of fields including education, medicine, business, engineering, law, government, and much more. This is a significant part of our population that contributes to the rich culture of Ohio, as well as the economic development of our state.

The Muslim community has long been vilified in the public sphere and experienced institutional discrimination, but it has seen an especially dramatic spike of anti-Muslim hate in the past few years. The otherization, misrepresentation, and lack of inclusion of Muslim Americans leads to anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence. In Ohio alone, there has been an uptick of over 600% in the last couple of months, a much higher rate than the 216% increase nationally. Including representation of American Muslim history in the classroom is necessary to not only combat this hate, but to accurately teach American history and demonstrate the vast contributions of the community to this state and country.

Including diverse history in K-12 curriculum is also important to me as a Tongan-American because I didn’t learn much about Pacific Islanders or the impact they had on American history, and I certainly never learned anything about Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders in the classroom. It was not until college that I discovered the first group to reach the Americas about 800 years ago were Pacific Islanders, who were expert navigators of the ocean, and not Columbus as is widely believed and taught. This can be traced due to the shared DNA of unique sweet potatoes between the two continental regions. Further evidence but another similarity—it is called “cumara” in Peru, “kumara” in New Zealand, and “kumala” in my ancestral home, Tonga.

I respectfully and strongly encourage you to support HB 171. Thank you for your time and consideration of this important legislation.