



**Opponent Testimony for Senate Bill 83
Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee**

April 18, 2023

Cynthia Peeples, Founding Director
Honesty for Ohio Education

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Rulli, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide opponent testimony against Senate Bill 83. My name is Cynthia Peeples, she/her pronouns, and I am the founding director of Honesty for Ohio Education.

[Honesty for Ohio Education](#) is a nonpartisan, statewide coalition representing more than [50](#) organizational partners and thousands of students, educators, and Ohioans advocating for every student's right to receive an honest, high-quality education grounded in truth, facts, and diverse perspectives. As a coalition, we believe that education must reflect and celebrate all student identities, experiences, and cultures to maximize engagement and achievement. We believe that dismissing racism and discrimination, or minimizing its trauma and impact, irrevocably harms individuals and communities, and prevents pathways to reconciliation and healing. And we believe that honest education is the freedom of critical thinking, reflection, and diverse exchange of ideas, which are essential for a vibrant economy and high-functioning, multiracial democracy.

This is why we stand in opposition to Senate Bill 83 and similar legislative attempts that compromise honest education, muzzle academic freedom, restrict diversity, equity, and inclusion, and dictate the relationships we hold based on race, sex, gender identity, gender expression, and religion. The re-introduction of these measures across multiple legislative sessions is an unjustifiable waste of taxpayer time, money, and resources. Senate Bill 83, and bills like it, are not from Ohio, for Ohio, nor do they better Ohio. They are politically motivated efforts drafted by interests bent on micromanaging, manipulating, and dictating how and what tuition-paying adults learn, what and how faculty can teach, and how workers can advocate for safe and fair working and learning conditions.

According to The Chronicle of Higher Education,¹ 33 similar bills have been introduced in 19 states across the country. Thankfully, at least five of these bills have been tabled or rejected by states that value honest education and academic freedom.

¹ Chronicle of Higher Education, "DEI Legislation Tracker." <https://bit.ly/41Av6S3>.

Ohio's bill weakens academic freedom while professing to strengthen it. Rather than cultivating learning environments that speak factually and accurately about complicated aspects of our shared history and complex systems of power, Senate Bill 83 seeks to whitewash history, sanitize the truth, and reduce lived experiences around race and identity to "controversial belief or policy." Threats of disciplinary measures and loss of state funding cast a chilling effect education,² creating a climate of fear in the classroom for administrators, educators, and students. At its core, Senate Bill 83 is a retread of three failed educational gag orders from the 134th General Assembly that similarly labeled our identities, lived experiences, and realities as "divisive concepts."

Senate Bill 83 seeks to apply a "one size fits all" approach to higher education, imposing conformity on mission statements, course assessments and student organizations where it should expand freedom. It ignores the diversity of our campuses and the pride each takes in their legacy of commitment to their own communities. In a continued expression of Ohio's home rule principle, our campuses are independently guided by leaders and processes that reflect the communities and the students they serve. They should be allowed to retain that independence.

The bill's broad language banning the "segregat[ing of] faculty, staff, or students by group identities such as race, sex, gender identity, or gender expression," would have a major impact on many aspects of the college experience, including affinity spaces, new student orientations, majors, financial awards, residential housing, administrative employment, faculty employment, student training, and extracurricular activities.

What will happen to Divine Nine fraternities and sororities? What will happen to Ohio State's Inaayat group, a premiere Indian classical dance team? What will happen to Bowling Green's Men's Club Volleyball? What will happen to Kent State University's Kent Caribbean Student Association? What will happen to Wright State University's Asian Pacific American Medical School Association? What will happen to Chabad at Ohio University or Hillel at Miami University? What will students learn about the January 6th insurrection, or the brutal police killing of Jayland Walker that took place in my town... and countless other Black and brown lives taken at the hands of law enforcement?

SB 83's effort to ban academic relationships with the People's Republic of China or academic institutions with ties to the country would double down on fear mongering by certain leaders in the US, potentially adding to the record surge of hate crimes against Asian American and Pacific Islanders we've seen over the past three years.³ Not only does this proliferate violent sinophobia, it prevents invaluable cross-cultural learning opportunities and important global research. This would diminish the education of Ohio students and put our academic institutions at a significant disadvantage to out-of-state schools that value international academic relationships.

As a broad coalition, we are proud to stand shoulder to shoulder with Ohio students, faculty, and staff who believe in academic freedom and embrace the rich culture and heritage that are OHIO. The lives of our neighbors and the identities of our communities are NOT controversial topics or divisive concepts, and they are not political currency or social capital to advance a national extremist agenda.

² Washington Post. "Ron DeSantis shows how not to run an education system." February 28, 2023.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/02/28/desantis-florida-school-performance/>

³ Department of Justice. "Raising Awareness of Hate Crimes and Hate Incidents During the COVID-19 Pandemic."

<https://www.justice.gov/file/1507346/download>

Thousands of Ohioans have spoken out against Senate Bill 83 with phone calls, emails, meetings, op-eds, letters to the editor, published articles, testimony, and showing up in our Statehouse. We urge you to listen to your constituents and the many student, educator, and community voices here today.

We ask you to vote no on Senate Bill 83, reject any attempt to fold this legislation into the state budget, and instead help us build an Ohio that we are ALL proud to call home.

Cynthia Peeples

- All students deserve an honest and inclusive education. SB 83 would compromise truth, allowing and encouraging half-truths to be told in higher education classrooms.
- This legislation uses doublespeak to weaken academic freedom while professing to strengthen it. It would have a chilling effect on free speech, creating a climate of fear in the classroom on the part of both educators and students.
- SB 83 rehashes prior educator gag order bills that have failed, and would turn the identities of students and our neighbors into “divisive concepts.”
- Rather than cultivating learning environments that help students understand complicated aspects of our shared history and complex systems of power, SB 83 seeks to whitewash history, sanitize the truth, and reduce lived experiences around race and identity to “controversial beliefs and policies.”
- Ohio’s campuses are independently guided by leaders and processes that are reflective of the communities and the students they serve. SB 83 applies a “one size fits all” approach to everything from university mission statements, to assessments of courses from every branch of study, to every kind of student organization on campus.
- The bill would require Ohio’s public colleges and universities to cut academic ties with schools in the People’s Republic of China or any academic institution with ties to the PRC, endorsing xenophobia over cross-cultural relationships and understanding. This would potentially diminish the education of many Ohio students and put our academic institutions at a disadvantage to schools in other states, in some cases costing schools grant money.
- SB 83’s broad language banning the “segregat[ing of] faculty, staff, or students by group identities such as race, sex, gender identity, or gender expression,” will have a major impact on all kinds of aspects of the college experience, including new student orientations, majors, financial awards, residential housing, administrative employment, faculty employment, student training, and extracurricular activities.
 - What will happen to Divine Nine fraternities and sororities? What will happen to Ohio State’s Inaayat group, a premiere Indian classical dance team? What will happen to Bowling Green’s Men’s Club Volleyball? What will happen to Kent State University’s Kent Caribbean Student Association? What will happen to Wright State University’s Asian Pacific American Medical School Association? What will happen to Chabad at Ohio University or Hillel at Miami University?
- Onerous administrative mandates in this bill would ensure that more of Ohio’s higher education funding goes to bureaucratic compliance and less goes to already underfunded learning programs, high quality faculty and staff, and aspects of campus life that support a positive student experience.
- No students have testified as proponents of this bill. Many students are testifying against this bill. When it comes to determining the student experience, the students are the ones we should be listening to.