

To the sponsors of SB 83, the “Ohio Higher Education Enhancement Act”

It’s ironic that one of the requirements of this bill would be making students read Martin Luther King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” I wonder if the sponsors of this bill recognize themselves in this passage from that letter -

“[T]he white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice... [L]aw and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice... When the [politicians] fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress... Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.”

This bill is about a supposed form of order, not justice. It will create a chilling effect on what can and will be said in the classroom. You’re pretending this bill will create more lively debate around “controversial beliefs,” but what will actually happen is that teachers will largely avoid talking about these topics altogether, because the risk of losing their livelihoods is simply not worth it. And, since they’d be legally barred from striking, they would have no recourse to address this. And since there is so much new oversight regarding what they’re teaching, there are so many more ways they could be put in hot water, and so many more people looking to do so. And you, the sponsors, know all this. You’ve designed a bill in which no single part outright bans certain topics from the classroom, but multiple parts of the bill, read together, make it clear what your intentions are – to ban certain topics by other means, by making teachers, and many students, afraid to talk about them. In other words, you are seeking a negative peace, an absence of tension through an absence of certain ideas, a campus culture of fear.

To the sponsors of this bill – I call you all cowards. You are afraid of certain ideas. You’re afraid of what might happen if young people are given multiple perspectives on certain aspects of our shared human history. You’re afraid of what might happen if young people hear ideas they’ve never heard before, or even if they have to engage with ideas they might not like. And beyond that, you are afraid to even come out and speak in plain language about your goals. You call this the “Education Enhancement” Act when it actually diminishes education and the experiences of teachers and students alike.

You pretend you’re working toward freedom, when you’re working toward censorship and limited, compulsory educational opportunities. You’re claiming to work toward individual rights while attempting to make everyone think and act the same. And you all know that this is what you’re doing. You are all anti-freedom, anti-liberation, anti-education, anti-intellectualism, anti-individualism, anti-child, anti-student, anti-teacher, anti-labor. The classroom is the place for ideas to be tested – but you’re afraid of debating, or of letting others debate these ideas for themselves. This is the kind of thing we would see in Stalinist Russia. So I also call you anti-American. You are cowards, because everyone, you included, can see what you’re doing, and yet you refuse to just come out and admit it. You want teachers to be as afraid of these ideas as you are, just for different reasons and much greater personal consequences. You are cowards.