

Interested Party Testimony for S.B. No. 1  
House Workforce and Higher Education Committee  
Wednesday, February 26, 2025  
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Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio, and members of the House Workforce and Higher Education Committee, it is a privilege to provide interested party testimony on S.B. No. 1, which aims to reshape the functionality of higher education, define “intellectual diversity,” and prohibit diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in multiple facets.

My name is Ivory L. Kennedy Jr., and I serve as the Program Manager for both Middle Childhood and Integrated Social Studies (B.S.Eds) Education at The Ohio State University. I come before you today not only as an educator but as a steward of our collective historical narrative—a narrative that is both beautiful and complex, inspiring and sobering. My purpose today is to express deep concern about Ohio S.B. No. 1 particularly the provisions that prohibit Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs while simultaneously promoting the ideal of intellectual diversity.

As a history educator, I firmly believe that to understand who we are as a nation, we must engage with the full, unvarnished story of our past. S.B. No. 1 presents a fundamental contradiction: it bans the very programs that foster intellectual diversity while claiming to promote that same principle.

This is not just a policy debate; it is a critical moment that will determine whether Ohio's educational institutions remain spaces where students can grapple with the complexities of history, society, and government. Our democracy depends on the ability of its citizens to understand and critically evaluate diverse perspectives. When we limit the discussion of certain topics—particularly those related to race, gender, and systemic inequities—we risk creating a generation ill-equipped to engage with the realities of our evolving, multicultural democracy.

The following testimony will outline the inherent contradictions in S.B. No. 1, demonstrate how DEI principles are embedded in the very documents the bill mandates for instruction, and highlight how these principles are essential to understanding our nation's founding and ongoing development.

### **The Contradiction: DEI & Intellectual Diversity**

According to Merriam-Webster, diversity refers to the inclusion of people of different races, cultures, etc., in a group or organization. Equity is defined as fairness or justice in the way people are treated. Inclusion is the act of including and accommodating people who have historically been excluded due to their race, gender, sexuality, or ability. S.B. No. 1's language advocates for intellectual diversity—a principle that is

essential for democratic learning and the free exchange of ideas. Yet, the bill simultaneously eliminates DEI programs, which are precisely designed to ensure that historically marginalized voices are part of academic discourse. This contradiction threatens to undermine intellectual curiosity, limit critical inquiry, and weaken the civic preparedness of our future leaders.

Intellectual diversity is not achieved by silencing discussions of systemic inequity; it is achieved by ensuring all perspectives—across race, gender, socioeconomic status, and historical experiences—have a voice in our educational spaces. DEI programs foster these conversations, helping students connect historical events with present-day societal dynamics.

The bill's insistence on faculty and institutional neutrality on "controversial topics" further complicates the issue. History is, by its nature, filled with controversy. Our nation's decisions regarding slavery, segregation, immigration, and suffrage were and remain contentious. Teaching these topics without context, nuance, or the perspectives of those most affected erodes the very intellectual engagement the bill claims to promote.

Without DEI programs, students will be left with an incomplete, sanitized version of history—one that does not equip them to understand the deeply intertwined nature of social, political, and economic forces in American development.

### **The Mandated Documents & DEI Principles**

S.B. No. 1 requires Ohio's public universities to integrate six core historical documents into their curriculum. These texts are, indeed, essential to understanding the American experiment. Yet, the irony here is stark: each of these documents reflects DEI principles at its core, underscoring the importance of diverse voices, equitable treatment, and inclusive governance.

These documents were chosen precisely because they articulate the nation's evolving understanding of equality, justice, and inclusion. Yet, the bill simultaneously seeks to erase the mechanisms through which these principles are explored in contemporary educational settings.

For example, *Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter from a Birmingham Jail* is one of the most compelling articulations of the moral imperative for equity and inclusion. King wrote this letter in response to white clergy who questioned the necessity and timing of civil rights demonstrations. In it, he draws direct connections between the nation's founding principles and the ongoing struggle for justice. He reminds us that "justice too long delayed is justice denied"—a statement rooted in the very ideals articulated in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

The mandated documents, therefore, are not isolated historical artifacts. They are part of a larger continuum that requires context, debate, and the inclusion of voices that

history has often marginalized. DEI programs facilitate this process by providing students with the tools to engage with these documents in meaningful ways.

### **DEI in the Founding & Political Evolution of the U.S.**

The principles of DEI are not contemporary inventions; they are woven into the very fabric of our political and social history. From the Constitutional Convention to the Civil Rights Movement, the American experiment has always been a story of expanding inclusion.

Diversity has always been present—often in conflict, but ultimately enriching our national identity. The Constitution itself is a product of diverse perspectives and competing interests. The Virginia Plan and New Jersey Plan, for instance, reflected different views on representation, and the resulting Great Compromise created a bicameral legislature that balanced the power between populous and less populous states. This compromise laid the groundwork for equitable representation in Congress, ensuring that all states, regardless of size, had a voice in the federal government.

Equity was similarly at the core of these decisions. While the 3/5 Compromise was a deeply flawed and dehumanizing policy, it reveals the historical attempts to balance representation across diverse populations and regional economies. The subsequent abolition of this compromise through the Reconstruction Amendments reflects the nation's ongoing commitment to achieving more equitable political representation.

In this bill, it mandates that the ENTIRE Emancipation Proclamation be a part of the “American civil literacy” course, which is wonderful. Are we all clear on why that proclamation was issued? The American Civil War. Understanding there are multiple narratives about the cause of the war, it was a measure of inclusion for the Union to be preserved, and withstand the fight for “states’ rights..” to maintain the institution of slavery.

Inclusion has been the nation's most enduring, though often incomplete, pursuit. The Constitution's amendment process was deliberately designed to allow for the expansion of democratic participation. Over time, the 15th, 19th, and 26th Amendments exemplified this effort by extending voting rights to African Americans, women, and young people, respectively. These changes illustrate the nation's recognition that its strength lies in its ability to adapt, include, and grow together.

## **A Call for Truthful Historical Engagement**

As the United States continues to diversify, the need for honest, inclusive historical education becomes more pressing. To weaken DEI initiatives is to weaken our collective understanding of how we became the nation we are today. DEI programs don't seek to divide; they seek to illuminate the connective tissue of our shared history, showing how diverse communities contributed—and continue to contribute—to the American story.

Avoiding discussions about race, gender, and systemic inequality will not erase these realities; it will only leave future generations ill-equipped to understand and navigate them. True intellectual diversity requires that we embrace complexity rather than retreat from it.

The path forward requires courage—the courage to confront the full scope of our national journey and to equip students with the intellectual tools necessary to engage with the democratic process. It requires us to resist the temptation of simplicity and instead embrace the educational mandate to seek truth.

**I urge this committee to reconsider the provisions in S.B. No. 1 that eliminate Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs.** If we are to uphold “intellectual diversity,” we must do so authentically—by preserving programs that encourage dialogue, inclusion, and the pursuit of a more perfect union. A government, made up of the people, that is run by the people, and functions **for** the people, should not seek to limit the discussions we must have among “we the people.”

Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome your questions.

Respectfully submitted,

Mr. Ivory L. Kennedy Jr.