

Testimony of Michael Piero, Ph.D.
Before the House Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Rep. Tom Young, Chair
March 11, 2025

Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio, and Members of the Higher Education Committee:

My name is Mike Piero, Ph.D., and I am a professor of English at Cuyahoga Community College, where I have taught for twelve years. I am submitting testimony as a private citizen today based on my own views, which are not representative of any institutions with which I am affiliated. I am a lifelong resident of Ohio.

I write today in staunch opposition to Senate Bill 1. Like similar legislation that failed Ohio (e.g. SB 83), SB 1 represents an unprecedented overreach into higher education, one that thoroughly undermines academic freedom, faculty governance, public education, and the ability of institutions to prepare students to enter the workforce well-equipped. Furthermore, SB 1 enshrines illegal, discriminatory policies via its partisan demonization of diversity, equity, and inclusion. In short, I oppose SB 1 on the grounds that **the bill is steeped in totalitarian tactics to silence educators, dismantle public education, and attack non-white students.** Ohio's educators, students, and parents are fundamentally against this egregiously bad piece of legislation, since it is driven by political surveillance, intimidation, and punishment rather than research-based methods of reforming higher ed and supporting student success.

This bill places arbitrary restrictions on faculty hiring, limits tenure protections, and forces a distorted definition of intellectual diversity that would hinder evidence-based teaching. To be clear, the point of tenure is not simply "job security" for professors; tenure is a crucial element that protects educators from political interference and, as such, is **integral to a democracy.** By weakening tenure, SB 1 makes institutions of higher education vulnerable to political interference *from any political party in power.* I would contend that SB 1 intentionally undermines democracy for political advantage, but regardless of intent, this would be the effect if enacted. SB 1 goes further by attempting to micromanage course syllabi, monitor faculty for ideological conformity, and eliminate vital diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives that create more accessible and equitable learning environments. This is yet another chapter in an ongoing assault on Ohio's experts and professionals in fields like education, medicine, psychology, and social work drawn up by representatives without the expertise to make informed decisions on these policies. Indeed, this bears all the markings of a government takeover of higher education for political purposes, an attack on one of the most democratic institutions we have in this state: a public education system free from political interference. **SB 1 would compromise Ohio's colleges and universities as places of free inquiry driven by research rather than political alignment; in short, SB 1 would infuse political propaganda into our colleges and universities at levels seen in only the most totalitarian states and regimes.**

SB 1 promises to create an adversarial relationship between students and faculty by encouraging students to find flaws and report faculty, essentially invalidating faculty tenure and academic freedom. Faculty should not report to students, nor should they report to politicians of any party; we report to our Deans, our Provost, our colleagues, and our field. There is plenty of oversight already; **don't make students spies and enforcers of an ideological war that SB 1 prompts and codifies**. That's not what students should be focusing on while in college, and existing processes are in place to address student concerns and complaints. SB 1 also ignores the fact that institutions, including my own, have always had a regular and rigorous pre- and post-tenure faculty evaluation procedure in their contract by mutual agreement. Moreover, that procedure allows for due process; SB 1 strips faculty of due process and substitutes an atmosphere of continual fear, which negatively impacts faculty mental health, productivity, and innovation. **The overarching question here is this: would you want your children and grandchildren being taught based on the knowledge and values of representative politicians or by highly-qualified experts, doctors, scholars, and scientists?**

Most troublingly, SB 1 threatens institutional funding based on vague ideological metrics. By dictating how and what we teach, this bill would weaken Ohio's ability to attract top-tier educators and students. Why would companies like **INTEL** and **HONDA** want to expand operations in Ohio when its colleges and universities are being attacked, intimidated, and prevented from letting their expert faculty do their jobs? Why would educated people want to move to Ohio when public education is being systematically dismantled (SB 1/HB 6, EdChoice, SB 133, SB 34, etc.)? The long-term negative impacts on Ohio's workforce would be extreme, and **SB 1 would stifle workforce development and community enrichment in Ohio**. As a father, I can tell you that I am already strongly encouraging my child to attend university out of state to ensure an education free from political meddling. SB 1 will disincentivize the following community stakeholders from living and working in Ohio:

- Ohio families who benefit from DEI programs—including students with disabilities, first generation college students, non-white students, students living in poverty, LGBTQ+ students, and more—who may leave Ohio for more just, equitable states
- Families looking to move to Ohio for employment but instead find work in another state with less totalitarian public education policies
- Ohio students want—and deserve—an education free from political interference; they'll leave the state and probably not return (why would they?)
- Ohio students will not want to major in education under SB 1 conditions, leading to massive teacher shortages in K-12 and higher education, as other Midwestern states have already encountered
- Current educators will leave, leading to 1) massive teacher shortages, 2) higher teacher-student ratios, 3) and lower student achievement
- Businesses that rely on well-educated employees with critical thinking skills will seek out better employee pools in other states
- SB 1 creates an impassible gulf between Ohio politicians and Ohio educators; there is no common ground on matters related to academic freedom, integrity, and our commitment to meet the needs of *all* of our students. None of this is up for negotiation for faculty and students. SB 1 creates the most adversarial relationship between Ohio representatives and educators, one that is as unnecessary as it is lamentable.

SB 1 would create a “brain drain” in Ohio that would foreclose a future of innovation and economic security for many sectors. **If SB 1 passes, I personally have no interest in continuing to work and live in Ohio; even just being under attack constantly by State Republicans is enough to want to leave.** That is, of course, the intent of this bill: to intimidate and drive out Ohio’s best educators, ones who don’t bow down to little tyrants masquerading as representatives. At any event, I won’t be spending retirement income in this State, nor any other state with fascist educational policies (e.g. Florida, Texas).

The success of Ohio’s higher education system depends on intellectual freedom, not political mandates. As someone who studies and publishes internationally in peer-reviewed journals on American culture, literature, history, and sovereign power, I am so thoroughly alarmed by this Orwellian bill that attempts a political coup over higher education institutions under the thinly-veiled guise of “reform.” Combined with the recent manipulation of the Citizens’ Petition that became Issue 1 and ongoing illegal gerrymandering, such actions point to a consistent effort among Republicans in the Statehouse to keep power, avoid accountability, and replace our democracy with an authoritarian state. Such overreach of power undermines the rule of law and the very foundations of our democracy—it cannot be allowed. **We may not agree on every issue, but safeguarding the cornerstones of a democracy—education and voting rights preeminent among them—should be something we all protect. If you agree, you must oppose SB 1.**

SB 1 enshrines discriminatory and largely illegal policies by means of its false narratives about diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Make no mistake: dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion is discrimination, white supremacy, and exceedingly unethical. The propaganda and disinformation campaigns in Ohio and at the federal level are steeped in ignorance and bigotry. **Banning DEI will harm our students and institutions, including potentially removing some of our best, research-based courses; removal of student clubs and groups that students rely on for belonging and leadership skills; abolition of student scholarships centered around diversity, including Veteran students and first-generation college students.** I teach courses that would be impacted by this legislation. I would not be able to use my 10+ years of education, research, and scholarly activity to teach Ohio students in research-based ways under SB 1. Make no mistake: SB 1 does absolutely nothing to stop largely “politicized classroom”—SB 1 politicizes the classroom, to the extreme point of negating the very possibility of a proper education.

I urge you to oppose this bill in the interest of our students, our institutions, and the future of Ohio’s workforce. Please stop the attacks on Ohio’s educators. We have important work to do, and living under constant threat and attack makes a challenging job all the more difficult. **Ohio and its schools face real challenges that need your attention, not invented “straw man” issues that rile up one’s electoral base nor politically-motivated mandates that overwrite Ohio’s doctors, scientists, researchers, and experts—the very people the Statehouse depends on for expert testimony and guidance, the very people to whom they trust their children’s education.**

Ohio’s schools face serious challenges that we rely on our representatives to sort out, not this “culture wars” nonsense. We have a critical teacher shortage. We have decades of

unconstitutional school funding, further compounded by the recent Republican-driven Ed Choice K-12 school voucher program and additional language in SB 1 that would loosen regulations on homeschooling and nonpublic schools (with the obvious intent of expanding religious-based Christian education in Ohio at the expense of a public education system free from religious influence, a plainly unconstitutional and totalitarian endeavor). We have students in some areas being left behind due to lack of wraparound services. We have ongoing literacy problems that leave our students ill-prepared for the workforce. We have an ongoing mental health crisis among our students. **Don't give us political rhetorics masquerading as reform; give us reading specialists and other resources to support all our students at every college and university in the state.** Don't hold Ohio's college leaders hostage under threat of funding loss—while it may not constitute the legal definition of extortion (though it should), that's the chilling effect of how SB 1 has been presented in the Senate. I cannot imagine any college or university leader supporting SB 1 if politicians hadn't made it so clear that SB 1 opponents would risk losing Ohio funding. *Ohio educators are vehemently against SB 1 because it destroys the integrity of our work.*

SB 1 is bad for Ohio students and educators. SB 1 is bad for Ohio colleges and universities. The only people who stand to benefit from SB 1 are politicians who want to remain in power, who want to undermine public institutions like public education, and who want to push religious-based education in public schools. Ohio's higher education system needs reform. We are eager to collaborate on such reforms, but we will not stay silent as these assaults on our profession and our democracy continue. I have to believe that most House and Senate representatives know that this bill is wrong; now is the time to be brave and to stand up for what is right for Ohio families, students, and educators.

Respectfully,

Michael Piero, Ph.D.