

Testimony Opposing SB 1

Ashley E. Nickels. Ph.D.

Private Citizen & Associate Professor, School of Peace and Conflict Studies
Kent State University

Submitted: February 10, 2025; Presented: February 11, 2025.

Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Higher Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Ashley Nickels, and I am a faculty member in the School of Peace and Conflict Studies at Kent State University. But today, I am here as a private citizen, speaking on my own behalf. I have dedicated my career to studying civic power and democracy, to understanding how people engage in public life, and to teaching students how to navigate conflict in constructive ways. I am also the parent of a rising college student who had planned to attend Kent State this fall but is now questioning whether to stay in Ohio. This uncertainty reflects a larger concern: What kind of education will Ohio offer if Senate Bill 1 becomes law?

In my classroom, students come from different political backgrounds, lived experiences, and perspectives. Some are deeply engaged in social justice movements; others are more skeptical of political action altogether. What unites them is the space to ask difficult questions and engage in hard conversations about power, governance, and justice. SB 1 undermines the very foundation of higher education by restricting these discussions—by replacing critical inquiry with political control. It sends a clear message that certain ideas, certain people, and certain histories should not be discussed.

A democracy cannot function without people who know how to wrestle with hard questions, engage across differences, and challenge ideas—including their own. SB 1 is a direct threat to this mission.

As John Dewey reminds us, “Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.” Education is not just about transferring knowledge—it is about equipping students with the ability to think critically, engage in meaningful dialogue, and participate fully in civic life. When we restrict what can be discussed in classrooms, we are not just limiting education—we are weakening democracy itself.

SB 1 does not strengthen education; it weakens it. It:

- Undermines academic freedom and faculty governance, opening the door for politically motivated firings.
- Eliminates diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, erasing vital support systems that many students rely on for mentorship, guidance, and belonging.

- Imposes state-mandated censorship, making it harder for faculty and students to engage with complex social and political issues that shape our communities and our democracy.

A healthy democracy depends on a well-educated, critically thinking public—on people who can disagree without demonizing, engage without fear, and learn without censorship. As someone who teaches conflict transformation, I know that disagreement is not dangerous—but suppressing ideas is. SB 1 is not about strengthening higher education; it is about controlling it.

As a faculty member and a parent of a rising college student, I see firsthand the stakes of this bill. I urge you to reject SB 1 and defend Ohio's public universities as spaces of genuine learning, inquiry, and debate.