

Chairman Wiggam, Vice Chair John, Ranking Member Kelly and members of the House State and Local Government Committee-

Thank you for allowing me to provide testimony for HB 322. My name is Chris Stepp and I am testifying in opposition to HB 322.

I come to you today as a teacher of 22 years who spends a lot of her life with children, mostly ten year old students and of course my own daughter, who is nine.

I come to you today as someone raised by working class White people who are so good and so hardworking. I love them dearly. And, at this point in my life, I am now aware of the racism that I grew up seeing, hearing, and learning because it was in the air I breathed, if you will. When I teach children who come from a similar background, you can rest assured that I do it with great care. I believe in them and their ability to think critically about history and current events.

When I teach children who come from a different background than mine, you can rest assured that I also do so with great care and respect. Thankfully, I have befriended individuals who did not shy away from difficult topics in history or current events, but rather showed me all that I did not know about the world: the good, the bad and the ugly. I feel lucky to have learned about what exists in our world that you may not always see until someone shows you: the sexism, the racism, the powerful patriotism, the astounding courageousness. When I learned about injustice, I wanted to fight to make the world just. When I learned about others doing good work in the world, I was inspired. This same phenomenon happens in my classroom. No matter the race or ethnicity of the students, kids know when something isn't just and they often feel empowered to do something about it.

I watched the proponent testimony for this bill and the proponents of this bill seem afraid that White kids are going to feel bad when they learn about some parts of history. Guess what? They are! Because every human (who has a healthy portion of their humanity intact) feels bad when they learn about the oppression of others. Thank goodness! Young people have their humanity intact. This inspires me; it's part of what I love about being in the presence of children every day. Their moral compass is alive and well.

I want children to learn about difficult topics in history from caring, informed teachers. I don't know how many teachers you know, but in my experience, most of them are incredible individuals. This bill does not respect teachers. This bill does not recognize the skill that teachers have in building a relationship with kids. This bill does not recognize the hours of research from multiple sources that teachers do in order to get the facts straight. This is what good teachers do. When a child feels acknowledged, accepted and included in a classroom, that child can handle difficult information. Kids are amazingly resilient and powerful thinkers.

I wish that I had learned the real history of my country in school with my teachers. Do you know where I learned about slavery? Watching Roots on television in the

1970s. Do you know where I learned the truth about Christopher Columbus? In *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn. My brother read it in college and said, "Sister, you have to read this book. It will blow your mind." And it did.

Howard Zinn says this in the Introduction to his adaptation for younger readers " It seems to me it is wrong to treat young readers as if they are not mature enough to look at their nation's policies honestly. Yes, it is a matter of being honest. Just as we must, as individuals, be honest about our own failures in order to correct them, it seems to me we must do the same when evaluating our national policies.

Patriotism does not mean unquestioning acceptance of whatever the government does. To go along with whatever your government does is not a characteristic of a democracy.If you live in a democratic state, it means you have the right to criticize your government's policies."

Take the Declaration of Independence for example. I am inspired each and every time I hear or read the words of the Declaration or the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States. These are precious, powerful pieces of our history. But at the time they were written, everyone wasn't included and that had some major consequences then and it still does now. We haven't yet realized the dream of these documents. That doesn't mean it's not a powerful dream that cannot inspire us. We can believe in that dream and look at where it falls short.

The American values as stated in HB 322, are White American values. If women, poor folk (note: intentional use of the "x" in that word), and people of color were not included in these founding documents, how can the founding documents be truly American? Are women, poor people and people of color not American??

We are poised as a nation to make the most important social change this country has ever seen. This happens in part by teaching history the way it should be taught. We can fulfill the promise of this great nation by teaching our students that when you make a mistake, you can make an attempt to right the wrong.

I am at the age where I am beginning to think of my legacy. I hope you are thinking of yours, too, as you consider these bills in your positions of power. If you haven't read James Baldwin, please consider doing so as soon as you can. His message is eerily as relevant today as it was in the 1960s. James Baldwin never gave up on the fundamental sacrality of human beings. He believed that we are all sacred. He, along with Eddie Glaude who researched Baldwin deeply in his book *Begin Again*, has helped me to see that the racism of White Americans like me not only makes life hell for my fellow Black citizens....but it " is literally deforming the character of the people who embrace it." (I would add here that I believe most times this embracing is unconscious. Again, to use a metaphor, racism is the air we breathe, the water we swim in...) "Our character is fundamentally changed by all of this."

When Baldwin was asked about learning about each other's backgrounds and experiences, he said this " I think that you and I can learn a great deal from each other. If you can overcome the curtain of my color. This country's mine too. White

means that you are European still. And Black means that I am African. And we both know, we've been here too long, you can't go back to Ireland or Poland or England. And I can't go back to Africa. We will live here together or we will die here together. I am telling you. Time is telling you. You will listen or you will perish."

Let's choose living! Please don't disrespect me. Please don't lose faith in our children. Please do not support this bill as it is written.