

Good afternoon, Chairman Wiggam, Vice Chairwoman John, Ranking Member Representative Kelly, and Members of the State and Local Government Committee;

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Cristina Rivera. I am a Ph. D. candidate at The Ohio State University, where I have also taught several undergraduate courses that focus on diversity through children's and young adult literature. I have also volunteered for and worked with youth programs here in Columbus that aid non-White students in getting similar resources as students from more privileged communities. I have also bartended in Columbus for the past four years, where I have had the opportunity to converse with various individuals with differing identities and political backgrounds about topics of race, gender, and equality. For these reasons and my desire to help our society grow into a safe and just environment, I strongly oppose HB 322.

As a college instructor and daughter of two Puerto Rican parents, I oppose this bill because I have witnessed first hand what we, the people, need to learn in our classrooms. Being an educator is not an easy path; we are overworked and underpaid. But now having to stand up for basic, fair, and just education demonstrates our country's values, which are in direct opposition to the principle, morals, and values it was founded on.

Voting NO on HB 322 will allow teachers to continue teaching students through diverse texts that provide all students pathways toward empathy and understandings of differences afforded to citizens because of the color of their skin and cultural backgrounds. Acclaimed children's and young adult scholar Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, in her book *The Dark Fantastic*, discusses the larger implication of excluding diverse books in the classroom. Not only does the social divide remain the same, but it also leaves out conversations about our reality today. Teaching diverse literature allows students-of-color to also see and imagine themselves in positive ways. It also allows all students to learn about historical and current factors that keep poverty and racism alive, which does not move our country in a better direction. I implore you to say NO to Bill 322 because if we do not teach our children about the real images they infer from the world around them, then we do them a disservice by keeping basic knowledge and tools for critical thinking away from them.

Education is primal. It is one key factor that has helped the human race evolve and transform into what it is today. You are all here today serving on this committee because of the educational opportunities allotted to you. And, I am here today because of my own educational background and experiences. So what makes you and I different? Supporting this bill tells me that you think you are better than me, that my opinion, voice, and education do not matter in our society. But when I too learned about the constitution in my primary education, that is not at all what I imagined as a little girl.

I want you to imagine with me for a moment. What does it look like if we educate our young people about difference? Will they continue to say and do harmful things to one another? Or will they develop empathy and understand that difference does not mean hate? Might children be able to grow up being more aware of their own ideas and be more cognizant of why others believe differently? What does the next generation look like when we give them the tools they need to make well-rounded decisions for the generation that come after them? What does it look like when the next generation can have differing opinions on political issues but still come together and work toward productive solutions? Isn't that what "for the people, by the people," actually stands for?

Being raised in California and moving to Columbus for a Ph. D. program, I am grateful for my time here. I have witnessed culture that is different than my own and learned about who people here have lived different lives than my own. Yet, I stand before you today without hate in my heart for these differences. I have learned that there is value in difference and this knowledge is what Bill 322 will take away from our children. If I imagine an outcome where I was given a dishonest education about people who live in the Midwest, I imagine I would not be empathetic to the hardships native Ohioans experience and would not care to stand here before you today to tell you that what you are doing not only hurts your children but also hurts you. Context is vital and what rationales are formed out of. Therefore, I hope you can understand that context, through history and current events, is imperative to education and the value of all people in this country.

I have experienced first hand a lack of global awareness from people I have spoken with in Columbus outside of the academic and education community. And I sadly must say that what frightens me most is the lack of knowledge about our own country by those who want to support it at all costs. How can I take the education system seriously if people haven't even learned what their country is? I am baffled when I have to explain that you do not need a passport to travel to Puerto Rico because it is part of the US, that my parents were US citizens from birth, that I am as American as much as they are. However, I cannot be angry at them. I cannot hate them for not understanding me. And, I most importantly cannot fault them because the education they have received is governed and decided by people in positions of power, such as yourselves, and that is where the problem begins.

I hope you can see that what I am trying to explain is that bill HB 322 will only continue to keep our citizens ignorant and this ignorance will further bigotry, racism, and struggle. And so I ask you, do you want that on your shoulders? Education should not be political. Education is literacy. It is reading and writing and learning to think for oneself with the tools of language and definitions. We need to give young people these tools to fashion their own awareness of the world from facts and figures rather than those indignant statements and incorrect histories that are raised out of fear. Why is the idea of a future generation that can think critically so terrifying? As a Puerto Rican, educator, doctoral candidate, and citizen of Columbus, OH, I ask you to strongly consider my testimony opposing HB 322 and vote NO on this bill.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any additional questions or provide input as needed. You may reach me at [crisriv13@gmail.com](mailto:crisriv13@gmail.com).

Respectfully submitted,  
Cristina R. Rivera  
Ph. D. Candidate, Educator, Human