

Testimony on House Bill 322 and HB 327
State and Local Government Committee

Submitted by:
Deborah Cooper

Chair Wiggam, Vice Chair John, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the committee:

Thank you for allowing me to present this testimony in opposition to HB 322 and HB 327.

I am an Ohio resident, a voter, and a former educator who has taught at all grade levels from kindergarten through 12th grade, as both a full-time and a substitute teacher in public and private schools. I have also raised three sons.

When I was a young child many years ago, a fellow fourth-grader (a “WASP” like me) said she could spot Catholics because of their olive skin, high foreheads and slanted eyes. I remember laughing and questioning her, but she never backed down. She “knew.”

This is how division begins. Human beings need to “belong.” We identify with a family, a race, a religious tradition, a culture, a country, a political party, a school, a town, and a team. Unfortunately, our need to belong can lead us to mistrust and even fear those who belong to other families, races, traditions, etc., we allow these fears to overcome our ability to effectively evaluate the information we take in about “others” with whom we do not identify. We have even more trouble seeing ourselves objectively.

I grew up in an all-white suburban town in the 50s and 60s. Real estate covenants prevented people of color from buying homes in our town, but I didn’t know that until I was in high school. The only Black person I knew for many years was our cleaning lady. Our high school history teacher insisted that the Civil War was not fought over slavery, but over “states’ rights.” He didn’t teach us about the connection between states’ rights and slave ownership, or about the Tulsa massacre, for that matter. I frequently heard classmates toss off racist comments, but rarely heard teachers correct them. I’m betting that most of my classmates knew as little about people of color as I did. That level of ignorance contributed to certain assumptions: Black people were poor because they were lazy or stupid, or to be feared because so many wound up in prison. As a young person, I imagined Black people would slowly assimilate as they pulled themselves up by their bootstraps. I only vaguely realized that they had trouble getting jobs, finding homes, paying for college, passing down wealth, etc. Public schools were – and still are – tied to property values, so the schools in neighborhoods they could afford to live in were not – still aren’t – well funded.

Like addicts who will not or cannot take the first step toward recovery by admitting to their addictions, we, as a nation, have trouble acknowledging certain uncomfortable truths about our own history. Too many seem to think we are being “patriotic” if we operate under a “my country right or wrong” philosophy. But that is an anti-democratic way of thinking. Democracy depends on an involved citizenry; dissent is vital to growth. If we really believe in the principles our founding fathers articulated, the most patriotic thing we can do is to be honest with ourselves, recognize our problems, and work to correct them. We don’t need to think of ourselves as “bad” people. As humans, we all make mistakes, and some of them very serious. We teach our children to tell the truth and take responsibility for their mistakes because we know that, in the long run, doing so will make them happier, healthier, and more productive members of society.

The preamble to the Constitution declares, “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” We do not now and probably never will have a “perfect union,” but our Constitution sets forth goals and aspirations of a government established “of, by and for the people” that is dedicated to “liberty and justice for all.” These are goals I can get behind, and I am truly grateful that I don’t have to live under Putin or the Taliban. I have no desire to live under authoritarian regimes such as North Korea or Syria, where citizens are at the mercy of their leaders’ whims and “free speech” can get you jailed or killed.

I want free and fair elections and accountable leaders. I want free speech and a free press. I want to live in a country where vigorous debates on important issues lead to actions taken in the best interests of ALL citizens. I want a robust system of checks and balances so abuse of power and corruption can be curbed, and I want “church and state” to remain separate, as our founders intended. But democracy is messy and hard to keep. It requires citizens who can think critically and make sound decisions. While it might sometimes seem “easier” to just let an authoritarian leader have his/her way, I wonder how many U.S. citizens would actually prefer living under an authoritarian regime.

Of course, no country is perfect, just as no individual is perfect. Our founding fathers were largely blind to the sin of slavery because slaves were essential to the fledgling economy, and those who benefitted from slavery (perhaps understandably) were reluctant to surrender their wealth and power. So, to justify slavery, early Americans had to cast Black people as “less than” and “other,” or even to believe that God intended for them to be slaves. This sort of behavior is, sadly, part of our human nature and not unique to our country.

An argument against “critical race theory” (which generally is not taught in public schools, but on the college level) claims that teaching about racism might be “divisive” or cause white children to feel bad about themselves. My personal experience growing up in an all-white suburb suggests that NOT discussing racism encourages and perpetuates ignorance and divisiveness.

Teaching children the truth isn’t that difficult and need not be oppressive. School lessons are matched to students’ maturity level and their ability to comprehend. What teacher would “lay a guilt trip” on a white elementary student? Rather, teachers teach their students about diversity – all of the different ways human beings look and live. They teach about equity – how to treat each other fairly. And they teach about inclusion – how to foster belonging. Such “DEI” instruction helps students see each other as members of the same human family, despite differences. This sort of instruction is essential, since students will need to live and work with all sorts of different people as they grow up.

What “DEI” does NOT do is to teach students how to bully each other. It does NOT teach students how to exclude those who are “different.” It does NOT teach students that it’s okay to lie, cheat, or disparage others as long as you “win.”

Young children often view the adults in their lives – parents, teachers and others – as perfect or infallible. They tend to adopt views or beliefs from these adults, and may carry them well into adulthood without ever examining them. If they never learn to evaluate the ideas floating around them, or if they fear rejection too much to challenge what they’ve been told, then they may become stuck with views so rigid that they have trouble adapting to a constantly (and very rapidly) changing world.

We must prepare students to live in a country (and world) filled with many different kinds of human families. Children growing up in this century have inherited huge, perhaps unprecedented, challenges. To prepare them to meet those challenges creatively and with hope, we must teach them to think critically, to evaluate facts and evidence, and to learn to appreciate others' differences. If we do our job well, the children of today will be better equipped to join hands with their fellow humans to "create a more perfect union" and a better world.

For the sake of the next generation of children, I urge you to vote NO on HB 322 and 327.

Deborah Cooper
264 Crandall Dr
Worthington, OH 43085
cooper.deborah3@gmail.com