

Opponent Testimony for House Bill 322
By Jennifer Weinbrecht
State and Local Government Committee
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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 Jennifer Weinbrecht. I come from a long line of Ohioans on both sides of my family.

With House Bill 322, some in our legislature seek to prohibit the teaching of issues surrounding our nation's history with sex and race. The language used to describe "prohibited concepts" sounds innocuous at first glance – of course an individual is not responsible for an action in the past of someone else solely because they are the same race or sex; of course an individual should not be discriminated against solely based on race or sex. However, the list of prohibitions and the vague language of the bill make clear that this bill is meant to intimidate and prevent educational institutions from teaching a broad range of facts, especially facts related to how sexism, racism, and slavery have played an important role throughout our nation's history and still play a role in our society today.

When I attended a semi-rural Ohio high school in the 1970's, our schools were so under-supported financially that we were on "split sessions" – where half the kids go to school in the morning and the other half goes in the afternoon. Our school did not have the budget to buy textbooks. Our American History teacher had a locked cabinet with shiny new books that he passed out during class one grading period. He passed them out and collected them at the end of class each day, and we sat and read them. Even the most rebellious, least studious kids sat quietly and read the books and looked at the pictures. This was the first time in most of our lives that we learned about the extent of the slave trade in American history: the enslaved people owned by the Founding Fathers; the enslaved people who built much of America and the American economy; the immense loss of life during transport of people across the ocean in the Atlantic Triangle; the extent of runaway slaves and Ohio's Underground Railroad; the real cause of the Secession that led to the Civil War. This was the first time I saw diagrams of people packed into transport ships. This was the first time I saw photos of whip scars on people. I was 16 years old.

I can't tell you how much I appreciated the respect this teacher showed us when he trusted us with this information. I was transformed and empowered by learning these truths. But I was also angry that this true story of America had been hidden from us for so many years. I sought out more information on my own. I read about the way colonists and later, Americans, treated the indigenous people who were already here when we arrived. I read about the contributions of African Americans to our culture and government. I read about the failure of Reconstruction, and about Jim Crow laws and about segregation and discrimination. Suddenly, Martin Luther King Jr's speeches and the social unrest of our time made so much more sense to me. And, I related all this to my own life. I researched the way women's rights were dismissed during the Framers' project. I thought about why it was that I never questioned society's expectations that, as a woman, I would wash dishes and cook and maybe be a teacher or a nurse, but not make things in a factory or lead an organization. I wasted years of my life floundering in my educational and job pursuits until I found a place where I could make a real economic contribution in a career that has traditionally been seen as "for men." I regret that I didn't pursue more of my interests

when I was younger just because “girls don’t do that.” I don’t want to see another generation of young people grow up not knowing the true history of our country and not understanding that the barriers that prevent them from pursuing their dreams can be overcome.

I am ashamed and embarrassed that so many of our elected leaders are responding to the current moment of racial and gender reckoning by putting forth legislation that would turn back the clock, as though all these issues should once again be swept under the rug. As though our kids should have to find out about them on their own. Relegating truth to a locked cabinet and books that never go home in bookbags. Taking away the historical context of the obstacles they must face in their own lives, so that they carry more of the burden on themselves rather than understanding that these barriers are larger than they are.

When you try to hide from our young people that discrimination, whether intended or not, still exists in our society and in government policies, you create the impression that most companies aren’t led by women because women cannot lead, that fewer of their African American cohorts own homes because of some fault of their own, that the trans woman they see in town doesn’t have a good job because she is deficient in some way.

Not only is this attempt to bury history morally wrong and harmful to our kids, it will also build mistrust because they will find out about these things. When I was in high school and a young adult, unlike most of my friends, I was a voracious, curious, insatiable reader; that’s how I was able to broaden my understanding of our history. You don’t need to be that geek kid today. Everyone can google information on that little phone they carry in their pocket. These kids will learn the truth, and when they seek to learn why they were not taught the truth, they will find that this ban on truth came from our elected officials who were responding to a moment of reckoning with fear and pettiness, in an attempt to pretend that our history involves perfect humans, not people with real lives and faults.

I respectfully ask you to drop this pursuit and resist the temptation to dumb down education.