

Opponent Testimony for House Bill 322
Margaret Mitchell, President & CEO, YWCA Greater Cleveland
State and Local Government Committee
9/21/2021

Chairman Wiggman, 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 Margaret Mitchell and today I am representing YWCA Greater Cleveland and am a member of the Ohio Council of YWCAs, a coalition of 14 sister YWs across the state. We strongly oppose HB 322.

YWCA is an antiracist organization focused on eliminating racism, empowering women, and fighting for peace, justice, and dignity for all. We are a trusted advisor on matters of racism and gender inequalities especially in Northeast Ohio's white communities. Our YWCA has been in service for over 150 years, and is one of the oldest continuously operating non-profits in Cleveland. Over that time, we have been an active part of protecting the rights and ensuring the success of people of color and women in Ohio. Since 2019, YWCA Greater Cleveland has been offering virtual racial equity education to over 30,000 learners of all ages across the country and we have seen first hand how empowering it is for people to grapple with a more complete, honest, and inclusive history of the communities they live in. One of the most common responses we receive to our work is, "why didn't I learn this at any point in school?"

This legislation would create restrictions around learning fundamental truths about today's world that ultimately will hinder our mission. Without the foundation of knowledge necessary to combat racism and gender discrimination, Ohio's children will be ill-equipped to combat issues impacted by systematic racism, such as our core issues: the housing crisis and the childcare crisis. Women and girls of color specifically are more likely to experience heightened discrimination against them; passing this legislation will also codify the disempowering of women and girls of color, whose experiences and stories will be legislated out of the curriculum by state-power that is *not* representative of them in the first place. Furthermore, I oppose this legislation for the following reasons:

1. **STUDENTS:** This legislation holds students back from engaging with perspectives outside of their own, thus barring them from cultivating critical thought-- something that is necessary to build a successful future. YWCA strongly believes that our children deserve a strong and realistic foundation to their understanding of race and gender, and should not be devalued in their education. The passage of this legislation also leaves Ohio children vulnerable to real world problems, college and adult life, and understanding their own worldviews in a world that is *already discussing these subjects in accessible formats, such as on the internet.*

2. **EDUCATORS:** YWCA recognizes the extensive pedagogy that is necessitated from teachers in today's age, who act as stand-in parents, nurses, therapists, and more when it comes to the care of their classrooms. During this dangerous time of COVID-19, should this legislation pass, it will create only more of a barrier for teachers in their classrooms to ready their students for the world. We believe this bill uses vague language that may lead to self-censorship of teachers who, in light of this, may be fearful of losing their jobs when approaching real history. It restricts the curricula, teaching methods, and lesson plans. This puts a tremendous burden on teachers, who are molding the minds of tomorrow's leaders and workers. Furthermore, punishing educators for teaching the true history of their diverse classrooms is forsaking their hard-earned pedagogy. It is punishing teachers for teaching: a field that is already underfunded and undervalued in Ohio.
3. **COMMUNITIES:** this legislation centers the history of white Americans, and insistently ignores the history of people of color, who have made the country what it is. Should this legislation pass, it will cripple the needs of communities of color, ignore the pain, suffering, and *resilience* of these communities. Cleveland is one of the most segregated cities in America and was rated the worst city in America for Black women. We can not address the very real structural issues we face if we do not take the time to educate our children on how we got here.

All children deserve an opportunity to learn the stories of their predecessors, and for non-white students, these histories are essential to understanding themselves. Erasing or muddling the true history of the US will harm all Americans. Additionally, learning about diversity, equity, and inclusion in a child's curricula is imperative for cultivating a well-rounded Ohio citizen. We know that more diversity is good for the Ohio economy, for our social relations, and for uplifting our state to the best it can be.

YWCA Greater Cleveland will always stand in favor of women and people of color. Our histories and stories matter. We are looking for honesty, equity, and legislation that reflects the needs of *all* Ohioans. HB 322 does not provide this. We urge you to hear our voices.

Thank you,

Margaret Mitchell
President & CEO
YWCA Greater Cleveland