

House State and Local Government Committee:

Having graduated from the University of Akron in May of 2019, I am relatively new to the teaching profession. I have little experience, and have not worked with a single group of students for more than a year. In fact, due to the pandemic keeping students out of school, the longest I have been able to work with a single group of students is about 6 months.

My inexperience is unlikely to convince you of my authority on the topic at hand, however I believe it to be my most important asset. For if the following arguments against House Bills 322 and 327 are so plainly obvious to an inexperienced teacher like myself, they cannot help but to move those with more experience and wisdom.

HB 322

“Sec. 3313.6027. (A) No state agency, school district, or school administration shall require a teacher of history, civics, United States government and politics, social studies, or similar subject areas who is employed by the board of education of a school district to discuss current events or widely debated and currently controversial issues of public policy or social affairs.”

At first glance, this section seems innocuous. Why shouldn't we give teachers the freedom to choose what they discuss in their class? It seems perfectly reasonable to allow teachers to use discretion when discussing controversial topics. However, I would ask you to consider the purpose of social studies classes. Why do we teach them in schools? Very few students will go on to use history in everyday life. Events such as the Civil War are of very little consequence to students whose lives are dominated by the next social media star.

Thus we do not teach history for the sake of history, but rather to inform us about how our world came to be the way it is. We teach historic events because they tell us why we coexist in the way we do. If we are not teaching current events in the context of history and government, why are we teaching history at all? One might quote Winston Churchill's words on the repetition of history as a reason to teach history, and that is fair, but if history attempts to repeat itself, is it not the job of teachers to stand in the way of that repetition?

It is therefore vitally important that we make sure educators are discussing these controversial subjects, and not shirking the massive responsibility that society has placed on them. For teachers are the vanguard against a populace who has forgotten its soul.

“Sec. 3313.6027. (B) In any course on history, civics, United States government and politics, social studies, or a similar subject area, no school district shall require, make part of such a course, or award course grading or credit for any of the following:

(1) Student work for, affiliation with, or service learning in association with any organization engaged in lobbying for legislation at the local, state, or federal level or in social or public policy advocacy;

(2) Lobbying for legislation at the local, state, or federal level;

(3) Any practicum, action project, or similar activity that involves social or public policy advocacy.”

Again I ask what the purpose of social studies is. In addition to knowledge of where we came from and where we are today, another major purpose of social studies is to encourage good citizenship. It seems to me that preventing student engagement in government does exactly the opposite. It creates passive citizens who do not know how to address grievances in the proper manner. This creates two problems.

First, the creation of passive citizens will stratify society. Citizens who have connections in government and business (i.e. affluent citizens) will use those connections to address their grievances. Citizens without connections in government and business (i.e. poor citizens), will not have their needs met because they do not know the proper channels by which they can address their grievances.

Second, the creation of passive citizens will lead to civil disobedience. Civil disobedience is, of course, a natural part of a healthy democracy, however less healthy democracies experience more civil disobedience. As such, passive citizens do not stay passive. All citizens have needs, and when those needs are not met, they communicate those needs in any way they know how. If citizens are not aware of the proper channels by which they can address their grievances, they will take improper channels.

It is the responsibility of teachers to show students the proper methods of addressing grievances, and this bill would prevent us from allowing our students to learn those methods in the best possible way: experience.

“Sec. 3313.6027. (C) No state agency or school district shall accept private funding for curriculum development, purchase or selection of curricular materials, teacher training, professional development, or continuing teacher education pertaining to courses on history, civics, United States government and politics, social studies, or similar subject areas.”

This prevents the development of good teachers to teach what is explained as necessary above and below.

“Sec. 3313.6028. (A) No state agency, school district, or school shall teach, instruct, or train any administrator, teacher, staff, member, or employee to adopt or believe any of the following concepts:”

“(8) Meritocracy or traits such as a hard work ethic are racist or sexist or were created by members of a particular race or sex to oppress members of another race or sex;”

“(10) The advent of slavery in the territory that is now the United States constituted the true founding of the United States;

(11) With respect to their relationship to American values, slavery and racism are anything other than deviations from, betrayals of, or failures to live up to the authentic founding principles of the United States, which include liberty and equality.”

History is a social science, and therefore history is messy. Anyone who tells you they can know the motivations and inclinations of historical figures or groups with 100% accuracy is lying. Thus, while we cannot know whether the concepts of meritocracy or hard work ethic were created or used to oppress others, we can certainly make the argument one way or the other. I will not do so here, as there are plenty of historical studies that argue both for and against this point. The same concept can be applied to the relationship between slavery and racism, and the ideals of the United States. It is a messy pool of evidence and counter-evidence.

The argument I will make is that it is our job as educators to wade through this pool with our students. It is our job to use the evidence available to us to help students make an argument on their own. If we as educators and educated come to the conclusion, through reliable and credible sources, that the ideas prohibited by this bill are in fact the truth, it would not only be disingenuous to teach contrary ideas, but it would be as a result of censorship.

“Sec. 3313.6028. (B) No teacher or school administrator employed by a school district or employee of a state agency shall approve for use, make use of, or carry out standards, curricula, lesson plans, textbooks, instructional materials, or instructional practices that serve to inculcate the concepts described in divisions (A)(1) to (11) of this section.”

If schools may still pledge allegiance to the flag each morning, inculcating students with a blind faith in their country, then prohibiting the questioning of the authenticity of those values of “liberty and justice for all” on the basis that it may inculcate an alternative belief is academic censorship for ideological purposes. If our aim is to be pure historical fact (however boring foregoing analysis may be), we must deny all inculcation, from our creation story at Plymouth, to the story of George Washington and the cherry tree.

“Sec. 3313.6028. (C) If a student completes a course that includes any of the concepts described in divisions (A)(1) to (11) of this section, that course shall not count towards the requirements for high school graduation specified in section 3313.603 of the Revised Code.

Again I ask the purpose of social studies classes, but this time I do not ask from the perspective of a historian, but rather as a teacher. I am not so naive to think that, through my brilliant teaching, all, or even most of my students will be inspired to go to college and major in history. I do not teach for a love of history. I teach for a love of learning. And while students may not remember who led the devastating campaign from Atlanta to the Atlantic in 1864, or even that there was a great march from Atlanta to the Atlantic in 1864, students will certainly retain the skills that they learn when writing an essay on whether or not Sherman’s March to the Sea

was necessary for the Union to win the Civil War. Similarly, students may not remember the names of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but they will certainly retain the skills used to determine whether or not the use of the atomic bomb in fact ended the war.

In social studies classes, the development of skills is infinitely more important than the content taught. So while the social studies standards for the state of Ohio deal with the content, students only learn that content if they learn academic skills like argumentation and critical thinking first. Thus it is extremely unfair to the students, who put in so much effort to learn how to write a comparative essay by doing research on pre- and post-Civil War life for African Americans, when they are denied credit because of the teacher's commitment to historical justice.

“Sec. 3313.6029. No teacher shall be required by a policy of any state agency, school district, or school administration to affirm a belief in the systemic nature of racism, or like ideas, or in the multiplicity or fluidity of gender identities, or like ideas, against the teacher's sincerely held religious or philosophical convictions.”

The denial of systemic racism and the multiplicity and fluidity of gender identities, as shown by many psychological studies, can lead to severe mental distress among children, the development of suicidal tendencies in children, and ultimately, child suicide. This has been scientifically demonstrated. If a teacher's sincere religious or philosophical beliefs included the outright encouragement of suicide, and that teacher acted on such beliefs, that teacher would not only be stripped of their position and their teaching license, but would also likely be criminally charged. However in this case, if a teacher were to show disregard for student safety in the face of psychological evidence that they may cause mental distress to a student, their actions would be protected by law. It is simply unconscionable to allow teachers the decision as to whether or not to put their students' lives at risk in such a way. In addition, this bill seemed to show great regard for the psychological stress a teacher may cause some students in Sec. 3313.6028. (A) (7), which states, “[No state agency, school district, or school shall teach, instruct, or train any administrator, teacher, staff, member, or employee to adopt or believe] An individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of the individual's race or sex,” while now seemingly disregarding a teacher's psychological impact on other students.

HB 327

“Sec. 3313.6027. (B) (1) No school district shall teach, instruct, or train any divisive concepts, nor shall any school district require a student to advocate for or against a specific topic or point of view to receive credit for any coursework.”

I will once again ask what social studies class is for. If it is for the glory of the state, so be it, but do not claim you fight indoctrination. If it is for the development of the skills necessary to

be innovative, productive members of a diverse society, this proposed amendment to the law accomplishes nothing toward that aim.

“Sec. 3313.6027. (B) (2) No school district shall accept private funding for the purpose of developing a curriculum, purchasing or selecting course materials, or providing teacher training or professional development for a course promoting divisive concepts.”

See argument against HB 322 Sec. 3313.6027. (C).

In conclusion, I am upset. As a historian, I am upset with the attempts to silence inclusive and restorative history. As an educator, I am upset with the attempts to curb independent critical thinking. And as a citizen, I am upset with the attempts to prevent the acknowledgement of the flaws of the nation, therefore preventing moves toward a more inclusive future. As an important cog in the machine that is the republic, I believe it is your duty to reject these bills as undemocratic and counterproductive.

Sincerely,
Richard B. Hall