

WITNESS INFORMATION FORM

Please complete the Witness Information Form before testifying:

Date: September 21, 2021

Name: Thomas S. Davis

Are you representing: Yourself Organization

Organization (If Applicable): The Ohio State University

Position/Title: Associate Professor of English

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Do you wish to be added to the committee notice email distribution list? Yes No

Business before the committee

Legislation (Bill/Resolution Number): HB 322

Specific Issue: _____

Are you testifying as a: Proponent Opponent Interested Party

Will you have a written statement, visual aids, or other material to distribute? Yes No

(If yes, please send an electronic version of the documents, if possible, to the Chair's office prior to committee. You may also submit hard copies to the Chair's staff prior to committee.)

Will your testimony be written, spoken, or both? Written

Please provide a brief statement on your position:

Please be advised that this form and any materials (written or otherwise) submitted or presented to this committee are records that may be requested by the public and may be published online.

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 Thomas S. Davis. I am Associate Professor of English at The Ohio State University. I have taught and mentored the best and brightest students in our state since arriving at OSU in 2008, including Rhodes Scholars and Fulbright Fellows. I have challenged our students in the classroom and taken them further afield to Antarctica and to southern Louisiana. For this work, I have received three teaching awards. As an educator, as a parent, and as a citizen in our democracy, I strongly oppose HB 322.

As an educator, I oppose HB 322 because it is a clear assault on academic freedom and the important work we do to teach our students how to think and thrive in a democratic society. Shielding students from the realities of history, from cultural differences and antagonisms, and from the intellectual practices of critique and reflection robs them of the many gifts and skills of higher education.

In my classrooms, we address a wide range of challenging topics that range from historical events like slavery, environmental racism, the horrors of warfare in the twentieth century, and concerns around state power, economic inequality, and, more broadly, the future, questions and worries that our students bring with them. Our students bravely engage these conversations, interrogate their own assumptions, and collaborate with their peers to think through different ideas and experiences. Ultimately, they learn to confront difficult ideas with care and empathy; they also learn critical precision and scholarly rigor. They develop necessary skills such as critical thinking, close reading of cultural histories, evidence-based argumentation, and the strength to know when they are wrong and the grace and humility that should accompany them when they believe they are right.

By prohibiting discussion of very loose and vaguely defined “divisive” issues, this bill directly undermines academic freedom and hobbles the vigorous forms of learning that students crave when they arrive on campus. This bill is also a severe intrusion of state power into the work of educators and their students. Not only will vague labels like “divisive” issues promote self-censorship in the class, they will create a climate of fear, suspicion, and paranoia among educators. This bill also assumes the expertise of the state over that of highly trained, experienced, knowledgeable, and decorated educators.

The one advantage of this bill is that it so clearly illustrates the forms of state power George Orwell warned against in *1984* that our students will now understand how fiction from the past might clarify the unfolding realities of the present.

I want to shift my role briefly and speak to you as the parent of a young child in public school in Columbus, OH. If his teachers are “prohibited” from discussing institutional racism in its various forms—Native American removal and genocide, chattel slavery, Jim Crow, Nazi Germany—he will be ill-equipped to comprehend the world as it exists and as it was made. This bill encourages, and perhaps necessitates, a sanitized and thoroughly dishonest form of civic education. It coddles students from facing the difficult realities of the present. It assumes they

are fragile and weak; it aims to protect and advance intellectual fragility over intellectual honesty and dynamism.

As an Associate Professor at our state's flagship university, and as a proud parent of a child in public school, I ask you to consider strongly my testimony *opposing* House Bill 322 and vote NO on this bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I hope you too will value the freedom of educators and the futures of our students.

Respectfully submitted,

Thomas S. Davis, Ph.D

Associate Professor

Ohio State University