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Testimony in Opposition to HB 322
Tim Johnson, Policy Advocate
Ohio Poverty Law Center
Ohio House State & Local Government Committee
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Chair Wiggam, Vice Chair John, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the House State and Local Government committee, my name is Tim Johnson, and I am a policy advocate with the Ohio Poverty Law Center. The Ohio Poverty Law Center's mission is to reduce poverty and increase justice by protecting and expanding the legal rights of Ohioans living, working, and raising their families in poverty. I am here today to voice our opposition to House Bill 322.

Ohio, like many other states, is currently trying to figure out how it can best give a complete account of America's history. An important part of teaching our country's history involves incorporating discussions about the role race has played and continues to play in our society. Discussions around race can be uncomfortable and much of American history is filled with incidents that are painful. Many schools in Ohio have decided to take a hands-on approach to teach a more inclusive and accurate version of history. HB 322 represents a misguided attempt to limit that progress by prohibiting the teaching of uncomfortable truths while also striking a devastating blow to civics-based education.

HB 322 prohibits the teaching of 11 concepts from being taught in K-12 public schools as well as state agencies. The prohibited concepts, while seemingly innocuous, are incredibly broad and leave teachers and administrators with very little wiggle room. Teachers will find themselves in situations where almost anything they teach could fall into one of these prohibited categories. HB 322 would produce a chilling effect in the classroom where instead of taking a deep and introspective look at American history, teachers and students will have to engage with the material on surface level, which will deprive students of the full and complete education they deserve. We should be supporting our teachers and offering them resources that will help them teach the most accurate version of our country's history, rather than passing legislation to silence them because some aspects of our history make people feel uncomfortable.

HB 322 will also limit the ability of students to engage with their government while taking civics or other similar courses. The bill explicitly limits the ability of students to lobby at any level of government. While the stated purpose is to stop students from being forced to support specific viewpoints, the language of HB 322 is so broad that it applies to any lobbying in any instance. So, a class that writes a letter to their state representative asking for maple syrup to be the state's official favorite pancake topping will be prohibited from doing so. A high school civics class learning about

local government, that decides to go to a city council meeting and ask for the city to build a new park will no longer be able to do so. It is important that we encourage students to participate in the process of government, prohibiting them from interacting with elected officials needlessly removes the ability for students to gain hands-on experience with how government functions.

Lastly, the bill also includes a provision that would prevent schools from requiring teachers to affirm a belief in the multiplicity or fluidity of gender identities. At first glance, it is not immediately clear what this provision has to do with the teaching of prohibited concepts. It appears to have been put in the bill to allow for teachers to not recognize the validity of trans, non-binary, and other non-cisgender students. Teachers, for example, might be allowed to ignore a student's preferred pronouns and deliberately misgender them with the school being powerless to stop the teacher. Not only could this harm a student's sense of safety in the classroom, but it could also encourage negative behavior by other students. If students see teachers deliberately misgendering a classmate, they may join in as well believing their behavior to be ok because a teacher is doing it. Lastly, the idea that teachers do not have to recognize a student's gender identity or expression is harmful because it attacks the very foundation of a person's identity. If a teacher does not have to acknowledge a student's expressed identity it tells a student that their identity is not worth recognizing. School should be a place where students are welcomed and accepted no matter who they are, instead, HB 322 will allow teachers to treat students as if their very existence is a divisive concept.

HB 322 not only attempts to solve a problem where none exists, but it will ultimately create problems for teachers and students. Children deserve a full and honest education from their teachers, something that would be denied to them if HB 322 becomes law. I urge you to trust teachers to be able to do their job and trust students to handle complex and difficult topics by voting no on HB 322. I will answer any questions you have at this time.