

State and Local Government Committee  
Representative Scott Wiggam, Chair  
H.B. 322 and H.B. 327

Wednesday, September 22, 2021 3pm

In Opposition

As a parent, educator, and concerned American, I am testifying against H.B. 322 and HB 327 for three reasons:

1. Vague restrictions placed on the content educators can teach limits the ability to share uncomfortable truths about America.
2. Extreme consequences for not upholding subjective rules compromise teachers' careers.
3. Student's and parents' uncomfortable feelings are centered at the expense of learning difficult history that we all must know to create the kind of America we say we want.

H.B. 322 and HB 327 advocate against students learning the overt and covert ways policies, practices, and systems shape their lives. One essential way students should know about systemic racism is through the education system. Our children can have different educational outcomes because of past and current discriminatory housing practices and the unconstitutional way Ohio funds public schools. This is an example of systemic racism that we should all want to change. A history or civics teacher should not have their livelihood compromised because they want to educate all children on current topics like the Fair School Funding Plan. Such a lesson would explain why new funding strategies for our schools can help eliminate the inconspicuous racism so many of us want to remove.

But our students and parents can't fully understand why such a new funding plan is necessary if they don't understand how racism can work in ways that are not always so obvious. We must talk about specific concepts like how The Ohio State University got access to the land it has and the Native Americans that were displaced in order for us to have that institution. It is an important specific concept to focus on but would be outlawed based on this legislation. Understanding why there is a street called Africa Road and why such an avenue to freedom was necessary is a specific concept that children need to learn. Learning why our American government justified placing Japanese-American citizens in concentration camps on our soil, ultimately causing the loss of jobs, homes, income and even death are important specific concepts that our children should learn. Many of those Japanese-Americans are still alive today.

This history is uncomfortable. It's a history that should make us all sad because real human beings - mothers, fathers, children, grandmothers, uncles and friends - were traumatized, physically harm, or killed because rules, laws, policies and overlooked actions by people in power allowed these things to happen. We can't decide to not teach this history because our children will be uncomfortable. If we want to shape empathetic human beings, they should be uncomfortable when they hear this history. It's sad. The question is, how will we help our children have the social and emotional learning to be able to withstand that sadness and think about what action they should take to ensure no one else's mother, grandmother, father, or friend ever experiences these things again? This bill seeks to stop the teaching of divisive concepts. But divisive for whom? Who is at the center of this manufactured controversy? Whose feelings is this bill trying to protect?

One of the most commonly misunderstood phrases is white supremacy. Too often, people align white supremacy only with extremist groups that focus on people of European descent, such as

the Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nation, or others. However, white supremacy can manifest in many other ways. Essentially, white supremacy means centering the identities of people of European descent. Supporting white supremacy is saying directly (or implying) that their knowledge, creativity, standards of beauty, or ways of knowing are the most accurate, valid, and meaningful. This bill says we should not focus on specific concepts based on identity. However, traditional textbooks and curriculum in the American education system disproportionately focuses on white men. That doesn't mean we should not learn about the founding fathers of this country and a host of inventors and thought leaders who happen to be white and male. But to only or mostly focus on them implies that there are no other stories to tell. By neglecting these other stories is a form of white supremacy. We should learn about Andrew Jackson and how he defeated the British at the Battle of New Orleans. We should learn that he led the effort people's access to vote whether or not they had property. We should also learn that he specifically fought for white men to participate in democracy - not white women or people of color regardless of gender. We should also learn that Native Americans fought physically and in court to stay on their Southeastern land of what we call today Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, North Carolina and Florida. Native Americans won their case. But Andrew Jackson dismissed the ruling of the Supreme Court and led a brutal campaign for Native Americans' removal off their land resulting in the infamous Trail of Tears.

So much of the history that goes unexplored in traditional education is challenging. Many textbooks cover chattel slavery in the United States. Every year as an African-American child, that unit felt very uncomfortable for me. I was intrigued by the history, but also sad and embarrassed that the only time my identity was highlighted in school was in this manner. As a result, I cannot say that I felt psychologically safe. However, I wouldn't advocate taking that out of the curriculum. Instead, I would've preferred that my teacher offered strategies for helping me feel more psychologically safe in the classroom. One way could be to counter the chattel slavery narrative with stories of maroon communities throughout the United States, Brazil, and the Caribbean. These were African people who brought their intellect from Africa to build communities of resistance against oppression. They used their ways of knowing, understanding plant life, martial arts, and astronomy to build community once they ran away from plantations and the terror they experienced. They also gain help from white allies fighting against slavery. With this additional information, I would've left that conversation a very different child. My non-black classmates would not have reduced my history to one of oppression and could have seen that there were heroes that looked like them. We would have learned a history that included resilience and intellect that is not often taught alongside that curriculum.

Hard history doesn't have to be divisive, but it will be uncomfortable. Some facts make people feel unsafe. For some, difficult history that includes historical actors that look like them can feel like an attack. But just because someone feels uncomfortable does not mean they are emotionally unsafe. It just means learning about something hard to hear. Ohio Teachers and other educational staff have ongoing training opportunities on social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL helps students and teachers learn how to understand what they are feeling and turn those feelings into something productive. A way to turn that knowledge into something good is through action.

When students learn what is going on in their community and country, they may be motivated to enact change. Such individual actions within a power system is the beauty of a functioning democracy. Students taking an elective course or choosing to take on a project in their class that advocates for equality are opportunities for practical application of what America is supposed to stand for. Creating a law that states students cannot be rewarded course credit for lobbying or other work surrounding social or public policy advocacy is the opposite of

democracy. That is what H.B. 322 and HB 327 does. Removing the ability for students to learn about lobbying against systems that harm fellow human beings ultimately keeps our young people from participating in meaningful social change. By advocating this kind of limited community engagement and direct application of knowledge is one of the most un-American actions one could take. This legislation implies that those who advocate for these bills don't want change.

This bill places uncomfortable feelings over democracy. It offers consequences to educators that jeopardize their careers if they commit violations against the subjective legislation. How do we create an educational experience that includes everyone if we don't talk about the hard stuff? How do we talk about history without talking about the ways America has executed extraordinary accomplishments but also incredibly oppressive things and help our children learn that tough history in order to not repeat the bad parts? If we don't understand the wrongs of the past, are we any better to act differently in the future? Essentially this kind of legislation paralyzes the growth of our nation and continues systems and institutions of harm because we won't be able to learn what we did wrong to know what to change to create the kind of country we say we want to have.

Sincerely,  
Melissa Crum  
Concerned parent and educator  
MelissaRCrum@gmail.com