

Opponent Testimony for House Bill 327
Dr. Pranav Jani, Director of Asian American Studies at The Ohio State University
and Parent, Central Ohio Public Schools
State and Local Government Committee
September 21, 2021

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 Dr. Pranav Jani. I am Director of Asian American Studies at The Ohio State University, where I am also a tenured professor of English, and parent in a Central Ohio school district.

Summary: I strongly oppose HB 327 as a parent of color, an educator, and a scholar. HB 327 will create a climate of fear that prevents educators from exploring histories and topics that would legitimate the experiences of students of color. HB 327 subverts academic freedom and aims to prevent critical thinking and truthful history through legislation.

As a parent in Ohio public schools since 2005, I'm very concerned that HB 327, like its companion bill HB 322, will eliminate education in schools that caters to *all* of our students, emphasizing that history is not just about what wealthy, white men did but about all of us.

Over the years, I can see teachers trying hard to prepare our students for the 21st century. They don't just learn about Columbus; they learn about Native Americans who lived in this land centuries before. They don't just learn about how "Lincoln freed the slaves" but the efforts of Black people to end slavery. They think, debate, and learn.

And yet, our schools have *much further* to go. Asian American kids like mine, for instance, still need to listen to very old stereotypes about Asia in school. They don't often see themselves in the curriculum – crucial for their development. There is much more we need to do.

But HB 327 goes in the *opposite* direction. In the name of not being discriminatory against any student, HB 327 implies that it is students of dominant

identity categories who need protection. The language around HB 327 and similar bills nationally paints a story of nefarious educators out to get white students, influenced by a bogeyman named “CRT.”

I cringe to think what education will be like for children of color if this bill passes.

As an educator, it is clear to me that HB 327 restricts academic freedom under the highly dubious claim of banning “divisive concepts.” One cannot claim to protect freedom of speech, academic freedom, and local control of education while giving the state government license to define what is “divisive” – highly subjective proposition – and punish individuals and school districts with sanctions.

The language in Section 3313.6027 of the Revised Code gives the game away, because its attempt to define “divisive concepts” objectively constantly slips, revealing its conservative/right-wing positions.

To take one example: a “divisive concept,” we are told, is one that teaches that “The United States is fundamentally racist and sexist” (1.b). This is classic dog-whistle politics – raising the alarm as if the nation is under attack while creating a climate of fear, as if talking about difficult events of the past is somehow “anti-American.”

Language and legislation like this prevent dialogue on serious questions. Should teachers let the fear that they might be seen as “fundamentally” insulting to the United States prevent us from talking about the genocide and land theft that allowed this country to spread from “sea to shining sea?”

Is it anti-American to discuss the laws and Supreme Court rulings that stripped away property and citizenship rights from Asians, when not barring immigration outright, until the 1965 Immigration Act, under pressure from the civil rights movement, allowed (limited) Asian immigration again?

Subsequent attempts to define “divisive concepts” in the Revised Code, similarly, reveal legislators’ wariness with histories that challenge our students rather than allow for full and free discussions that our classrooms today require.

There are tough questions we should be allowed to discuss without fear of censure. Such as:

- Why does such racial segregation and disparity in housing education exist long after the end of Jim Crow laws?
- If we live in a meritocracy, why do people who work very hard not “make it”?
- How do our classroom demographics, our cafeterias, our athletics, etc. reflect both continuities and discontinuities from the past?
- How do race, gender, nationality and religion impact our interpersonal relationships, and how can we improve our interactions?

As a professor at Ohio State who teaches many graduates of Ohio public schools, I can tell you that students who have been trained in thinking of history and identity in complex ways excel at the kinds of critical thinking skills required in college. Those who are never challenged, who simply hear ideas that they already believe in repeated year after year, have a very hard hill to climb.

The world is moving forward. HB 327 holds us behind. I ask you to strongly consider my testimony opposing HB 327 and vote NO on this bill.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any additional questions or provide input as needed. You may reach me at jani.4@osu.edu.

Respectfully submitted,
Dr. Pranav Jani
Director, Asian American Studies at Ohio State