

Opponent Testimony on HB 327
Ohio House State and Local Government Committee

September 21, 2021

Chair Wiggam, Vice-Chair John, Ranking Member and committee members, thank you for allowing me to testify regarding this bill. My name is Ruth V. Spanos and I am a mother, a School Speech-Language Pathologist with Garfield Local Schools in Garrettsville, and the Mayor of Burton Village.

I strongly oppose HB 327.

As a parent, educator, and citizen of Ohio, I strongly oppose this bill because it not only limits educational freedom for teachers, students and families, but it runs counter to what we know about making education welcoming to all, and educating future citizens who can work together effectively and compete in the world economy.

This bill expressly limits discussions of “nationality, color, ethnicity, race, or sex”...which are exactly the conversations occurring across our nation in the news, online and in our homes. Schools, and especially public schools, are the one location where future voters encounter people from all backgrounds. They are precisely the place where our children should be exposed to new ideas and learn to discuss and disagree civilly.

In spite of the weak language protecting “neutral” discussions of these issues, this bill, as written, would encourage parents to sue schools. Far too often, parents and advocacy groups jump to conclusions before understanding the whole story. How much better to engage in discussions that would inform all parties.

I must admit, as an educator I have difficulty understanding how to comply with the text of the bill. In particular, the definition of one of the “divisive” concepts is problematic, in that it defines an approved position about personal relations between people.

“(e) Members of one nationality, color, ethnicity, race, or sex cannot and should not attempt to treat others without respect to nationality, color, ethnicity, race, or sex.”

It seems to say that educators cannot say any of the following:

“Members of one nationality shouldn’t/can’t treat members of another nationality without respect to their nationality.” In other words, people should pretend nationality doesn’t exist in their personal interactions. Would teachers be forbidden from encouraging some classmates to wish other classmates “Feliz Navidad” or “joyeux Noël” depending on the language spoken at home? Such experiences are an excellent way to introduce different cultures and prepare students to work with people from all over the world.

Regarding color, ethnicity and race, this bill seems to endorse the “color blind” ideal that

attempts to erase differences rather than celebrate them. I live in Geauga County, where the student population is of lighter complexion. Are teachers forbidden to point out that fact to our children? How will they learn to interact and work with people from other parts of Ohio, let alone other parts of the world if they aren't taught to celebrate difference, rather than hide it as a shameful secret?

Finally, "sex" is listed as another category not to be respected. Based on the context, I am assuming this refers to biologically based differences between men and women rather than issues of reproduction. I find it surprising that the Ohio Legislature is saying that public employees in Ohio are not to acknowledge that males and females are different. This is a far cry from banning discrimination. This interferes with how students are taught to interact with each other. I doubt any adolescent could get through a school day treating other students the same way regardless of sex. Are educators supposed to ignore these differences? How can any subject be taught without referring to the differences between males and females?

This bill wouldn't just limit teachers, schools and even local governments. It would keep OUR children from learning the skills they need to compete in the global marketplace. We need our future citizens to be culturally competent and curious about people who are different than themselves. We need our future citizens to celebrate diversity, not to fear or ignore differences.

Thank you so much for taking the time to read my testimony. I ask the committee to vote no on House Bill 327.

Respectfully submitted,

Ruth V. Spanos, MA, CCC-SLP