

Ohio HB 327 Opponent Testimony
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Dr. Sarah Stitzlein

Chairman Wiggam, Vice-Chair John, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the House State & Local Government Committee, thank you for reading my testimony today. I have been researching citizenship education at the university level and preparing teachers who teach citizenship to children for 16 years. While I am not speaking on behalf of the University of Cincinnati today, I am speaking as a national expert in citizenship education. In 2020, I was commissioned by UNESCO to write about the future of citizenship education and in 2021 I was commissioned by the National Academy of Education to write a major report on how to improve civic reasoning and discourse through citizenship education.

I urge you to vote no on HB 327, a bill which may overly restrict how we prepare citizens, especially for dealing with contentious topics. At the very least, the following clause should be removed: “nor shall any school district require a student to advocate for or against a specific topic or point of view to receive credit for any coursework.” This clause directly conflicts with clear research findings on the skills students need to learn to become good citizens and conflicts with the current learning standards endorsed by Ohio in English Language Arts and Social Studies.

When we prepare citizens, we must prepare them for engaging in the sorts of contentious discussions that take place in daily life, not just in the state capitol or in overtly political spaces, but also in our homes, workplaces, organizations, and places of worship. In those discussions, citizens must be prepared to take a firm and persuasive stance in support of their view, but must also be able to understand counterviews, detect when their view is faulty, and realize when compromise may be necessary.

As partisan divides grow deeper in our country, we need citizens adept at bridging those divides more than ever. Avoiding confrontations or silencing dissenting perspectives on contentious issues only further harm democracy and fail to prepare good citizens equipped with the political knowledge and skills for navigating partisan divides. Students need to be exposed to and understand perspectives different than their own about a host of topics, from the mundane to the controversial and even the divisive. While there are exceptions, students generally need to encounter people who strongly advocate for deeply held positions and to learn how to respond with civility, in ways that engage ideas, encourage dialogue, and pursue fact & truth.

Persuasive writing, debates, deliberations, discussions, and position statements have long been used to develop these essential citizenship skills. Research strongly supports these techniques, showing how they lead to more informed and engaged citizens who interact more productively with their peers (see excellent studies conducted and collated by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement and National Council for the Social Studies). Many of these sorts of techniques require students to argue for a particular position, the very approach HB 327 forbids. Sometimes, teachers wisely challenge students to articulate a view that differs from their own, as this helps the students to better understand the beliefs, values, and facts that oppose their own, develop counterarguments that bolster their own position, and engage in productive deliberation with those who disagree. That is not to say that the students must come to hold those views personally outside of the classroom, endorse them without qualification, or assert them to earn a favorable grade.

The clause forbidding requiring students to advocate for a specific position jeopardizes these important pedagogical tools at a time when we need them more than ever to help our citizens work across our many forms of division. **Rather than spaces devoid of divisive concepts, we need educational spaces where students are exposed to an array of ideas, and where careful and constructive conflict takes place, modeling civility and good civic discourse for students.**

Please vote **no** on this bill.

Respectfully,
Dr. Sarah Stitzlein
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