

OBERLIN

COLLEGE & CONSERVATORY

Department of History

September 20, 2021

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing in determined opposition to HB327. I am an emeritus professor of history at Oberlin College, where I taught from 1986-2016. Prior to that, I taught history at New York University, Yale University, the City College of New York, and the New School for Social Research. In 2011, I was named U.S. Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education. I also received the Nancy Lyman Roelker Mentorship Award from the American Historical Association. I have been teaching history at the higher education level since 1972.

Having studied and lived in many other countries as part of my research and training, I am acutely aware of how attempts to dictate how history should be taught, what could or couldn't be discussed, was *always* a fundamental road sign of those countries that had abandoned democracy. When I lived in Chile in 1972-1973, I witnessed in person how an educational system which had previously been open and devoted to a thorough examination of all subjects was closed down after the military dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet took power in 1973. A central characteristic of that dictatorship was its attempt to prohibit any information it deemed to be critical of its government. It did this by intervening to insure that curriculum considered "against Chilean national interests" would be quashed and any teachers found to be teaching such material would be fired and, often, jailed. Needless to say – or maybe we have come to a point where one must now say it out loud – prohibiting the discussion of various "divisive" topics in schools did not improve the learning or the lives of millions of children. It only led to their impoverishment.

Controlling the content of what can or can't be taught in schools and universities has *always* been a defining mark of authoritarian governments. Not willing to allow students and faculty to discuss controversial topics for fear of what might be learned, threatening teachers and administrators with dismissal should they dare to challenge the orthodoxy of what legislators (not educators) have deemed "appropriate" for children to learn: these are measures for which we have rightly criticized non-democratic governments, from Nazi Germany in the past to North Korea and the Taliban, today. And these are precisely the measures that are proposed in HB327.

Just take a moment to listen to yourselves: The same legislators who have attacked students for being "snowflakes" who can't stand up to difficult discussions in the

classroom but must run and hide are now on the verge of prohibiting topics from being discussed because they might provoke “anguish” or “psychological distress” to some students.

Nearly a half century of teaching history in classrooms in Ohio and New York, among other places, has convinced me that learning can be uncomfortable, and that opening one’s mind to new ideas – or to old histories – is not always easy and can meet resistance. But that is the *very definition* of learning. HB327, copycat legislation that has been rammed through in other states, is an anti-educational bill and an authoritarian measure. History cannot be taught or learned when teachers are forced to accept the party line, whether liberal or conservative, Democratic or Republican.

Our obligation as teachers is to base our teaching on research and evidence and to encourage our students to engage in broad and open discussion of varying points of view. When the state legislature tells me that I cannot examine “Slavery and racism [as] anything other than deviations, betrayals, or failures to live up to the authentic founding principles of the US, including liberty and equality” [HB322], it is actually saying: We will close our eyes and ears to anything that doesn’t agree with what we *believe*. When the legislature passes laws that prohibit we teachers from encouraging our students (and ourselves) from “taking responsibility for actions committed in the past” [HB327], it is making a mockery of one of the fundamental goals of studying history, which is precisely to learn about the past so that we, as democratic citizens in a democratic state, can *take responsibility* for past mistakes and correct them in the future.

I write as one of multitudes in this country who have long fought long and hard for provisions that insist, as does HB327, that “An individual should [not] be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment because of the individual’s race.” But we *already* have federal and state laws that prohibit discrimination based on race. So can we be honest, for once. The bills before the Ohio legislature are not about racial discrimination; they are about a state legislature *telling teachers* not to teach an uncomfortable history – and not because it is factually wrong or analytically suspect. Will we next see legislation that prohibits the teaching of evolution because we don’t want to “distress” any student who would be troubled to learn that we share our DNA with chimpanzees?

But if basic arguments about the importance of an open education to democracy don’t sway you, then think about Ohio’s future. Think about the young people, so crucial for our advancement, who will abandon the state’s institutions of higher education because they *know* that the education *they are allowed to receive* is not based on science or evidence or truth, but rather was determined by a group of legislators who know better than anyone else what our students should be learning, and what they must not study. I fear for our future.

A vote *against* HB327 is a vote *for* Ohio. Please don't make a mockery of this state's educational system.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Steven S. Volk". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Steven S. Volk
Professor of History Emeritus
U.S. Professor of the Year (2011), Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of
Teaching and the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education