

Testimony on HB 327
Before the House State and Local Government Committee
Rep. Scott Wiggam, Chair
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Chairman Wiggam, Vice Chairman John, ranking member Kelly, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony in opposition to HB 327. My name is Susan Kaeser, I live in Cleveland Heights where during the last 40 years I have been a classroom volunteer in my neighborhood public school, a nonprofit director, and the author of a book about citizen led initiatives to integrate my community, *Resisting Segregation, Cleveland Heights Residents Shape Their Community, 1964-1976*.

Cleveland Heights is a racially integrated oasis in one of the most racially segregated regions of the country. It became that way because community activists who believed in equal citizenship for all people, fought hard to end housing segregation. I moved to Cleveland Heights in 1979 to be part of the diverse, inclusive and vibrant community that was the outcome of their activism. It was the best decision of my life.

On December 8, 1966, in recognition that racial change had begun, the Cleveland Heights-University Heights Board of Education unanimously adopted a new human relations policy that called for educators to address the “ethnic, racial and religious strands that are part of the American fabric,” and to “explore controversial issues.”(See Kaeser, 2020).

HB 327 notwithstanding, the train has left the station. It is hard to see how nearly 60 years after this policy became the norm for our schools and community, you can legitimately use your power to reverse it and countermand local values. Diversity is who we are. Inequality is something our students understand. Injustice is not theoretical. A law cannot prevent the truth from being spoken in any corner of our lives. It is a total over-reach for you to proscribe what issues our students can discuss in school.

My white children attended our public schools where, as the numeric minority, they received an education of incomparable quality because of knowing black children and being taught by black educators, and enjoying a curriculum that was inclusive of diverse perspectives and the contributions of the full breadth of participants in our society and history. And yes, they were encouraged to consider controversial ideas and uncomfortable and unjust aspects of our history and its impact on the present. It did not generate guilt; it made them critical thinkers. They did not experience indoctrination; it was authentic learning.

This local policy has served us well. Unlike the proposed legislation, our school board trusted teachers not to indoctrinate but to explore the full range of views and historic realities – that is what education does. They were not afraid of controversy but welcomed the chance for student exposure to multiple views. Students cannot become critical thinkers, good decision makers, and feel empowered to shape their lives and our communities without knowing about and exploring the multiple sides of any issue.

And controversy is at the heart of hard issues – the ones where good judgment based on information and consideration is required.

The Cleveland Heights-University Heights Board of Education may have been ahead of the times. But if the 134th General Assembly approves this law it will be completely out of touch with the present. HB 327, if approved, would take us backwards, would wipe out the reality and history of the majority of our students, and would undermine the integrity of the teaching and learning process in our school district. The majority of our children know the truth about inequality. They know about racism. It is their lives. This law won't change that.

The harsh consequences this law attaches to so-called “indoctrination” are in themselves dangerous. But what is even worse is the level of subjectivity involved in assessing if the dynamics of a class discussion or an assignment merit punishment. Who defines when a discussion has crossed the acceptability line? How do you stop children from offering their views or ideas? How do you assign intent when a lesson enters the area of controversy? Should an educator's career be sacrificed or a school's funding lost because one person found an idea offensive?

When the reality of one person's life is uncomfortable to a person who does not share that reality, prohibiting discussion privileges one person over the other, it doesn't foster understanding or empathy.

Education is about opening minds. How can we have an open society with this kind of restriction on thinking or speech?

A legal mandate to limit the discussion of difficult issues in any venue that receives public funds, enforced with severe sanctions, is a much stronger form of indoctrination than the free exchange of ideas that this law prevents.

The most engaging learning is about real issues that require thinking, debate, exposure to multiple perspectives, evidence, research, information, and understanding. This is why public education is nonsectarian, and why critical thinking is the norm.

Two important sayings come to mind. “Knowledge is power.” “Ignorance is bliss.”

The authors of this legislation appear to favor bliss over reality. Mindless acceptance of a limited perspective will not erase the truth. It will only weaken the capacity of learners to be informed participants in our society who have the power to shape a future that includes all of us.

I urge you to reject this legislation.