

9/21/21

Chairman Wiggam, Vice Chair John, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the State and Local Government Committee,

Thank you for allowing me the time to testify today. My name is Art Lewandowski, and I am entering my fifth year as faculty at Bowling Green State University where I teach methods courses for social studies educators. Before this role, I spent 12 years as a seven through twelfth grade social studies teacher in Ohio's public schools. I am also the father of three of Ohio's k-12 students. With these experiences and roles in mind, I am strongly opposed to House Bills 322 and 327.

In reading and listening to past testimonials, it appears that the narrative around these bills has centered on Critical Race Theory, attempting to stem discussions of race that might be detrimental to students. However, in effect, this legislation is much bigger than that. It will stymie *all* valuable discourse over current events and divisive issues that prepares students for the office of citizen.

HB 322 would "prohibit (all named entities) from teaching, advocating, or promoting divisive concepts." HB 327 (Sec. 3313.6027) prohibits discussion over "current events or widely debated and currently controversial issues of public policy or social affairs." Although the bill explicitly references issues of race, gender and sex, teachers are likely to avoid all possibility of controversy in fear of breaching these prohibited topics. Studies already show that many teachers avoid discussing contemporary issues due to fear of controversy (Patterson, 2010). Yet, to empower students and meet the intent of our state standards, we must offer students opportunities to prepare for and enter these conversations, to prepare them for the office of citizen.

The National Council for Social Studies argues that the "primary purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world." Our standards for every grade place emphasis on the teaching and practice of critical skills required of a democratic citizenry.

These include the examination of credible sources, analyzing individual and group perspectives to understand historic and contemporary issues (8.16 and others), and the development of theses and using evidence to support or refute positions (8.1, and others). Our national framework for standards to prepare students for College, Career and Civic life calls students “prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively” (NCSS, p.21).

Lastly, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), 32% of Ohio’s students are black, indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC). These students are not well-represented by Ohio’s teaching force (5.6% BIPOC) or by the Ohio General Assembly. This demographic, growing quickly, makes it all the more important that all of our students have opportunities to engage with diverse partners on issues that matter. None of these things can happen without discourse over potentially divisive issues.

Years ago, in one of my high school classes, students led weekly discussions over current events they had selected to research and discuss relative to our course themes. In one such discussion, a first generation Mexican-American student, Andre, addressed an article detailing the construction of a border wall with Mexico. As he related the article to government impacts on the economy, he expressed support over the initiative and asked his peers what they thought. His peers were shocked, and one exclaimed: “No! Andre are you racist?! ...They are only building that wall to keep out the Mexicans.” Instead of a scary moment, it was a teachable one. Slowing things down, students were able to have great conversations over 1) Stereotyping: just because you are Mexican American, doesn’t mean you are anti-wall; 2) Immigration and Naturalization: Andre’s parents had undergone full naturalization and he had supported the wall because he wanted all immigrants to do the same; and 3) Racism: What IS racism? Is Latino a race? Does advocacy for building a wall make you a racist? We had many more discussions like these, and like many of my colleagues, I often use divisive compelling questions like “Christopher Columbus: Hero, or Zero?” to motivate students to research and engage.

These topics will and should be discussed with or without teachers, but if not unpacked in the classroom that day, they would have likely retreated to echo-chambers of groupthink and

metastasized in the lunchroom and at home, only to reinforce the social division and partisanship that is increasingly detrimental to our youth and our democracy. My sophomores loved those discussions, and in their senior Government class, they would go on to write letters to our legislators and speak in front of the city council and the school board on local issues that moved them. Powerful and purposeful learning experiences like these would be prohibited by this new legislation. Engaging with divisive topics helped these students to face stereotypes and find common ground. They became part of the engaged citizenry, more critically aware and more astute at *civil* civic discourse than many adults I know and love.

If not to prepare for current events and divisive issues, what is left for social studies education? Just patriotism? John Dewey was arguably the foremost framer of American public education, for the sake of democracy. In 1916, he warned at length against the divorce of formal education and knowledge from experience, social application and purpose. This would be, he argued, to the detriment of education, our youth, and our democracy. Similarly, HB 322 and 327 undermine the very purpose, relevance and practice of social studies, reducing its content to the memorization of names, dates and places. This is teaching to “transmit” and preserve the social order, as opposed to teaching to “transform,” preparing students for the society that will, or ought to be (McAvoy and Hess, 2016).

I realize that the specifically banned theses such as those in HB 322 3313.6027, A1-11, do not include all current events, but the preceding statements that ban the awarding of course credit for divisive issues or current issues will cause more social studies teachers, many already intimidated, to shy away from all discussions of contemporary issues. It is the freedom to discuss these issues, protected by the First Amendment, that gives us our liberty, and we need to prepare students for this adult civic responsibility. These bills not only undermine the integrity of teachers, they degrade the ability of our students to think critically, to learn and practice citizenship, seemingly to fight against the phantom fear of Critical Race Theory. Thank you again for the opportunity and consideration of my testimony. I strongly urge you not to throw the democratic baby out with partisan bathwater, to vote NO on HB 322 and 327. I will now take any questions you may have.