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This committee is being asked to consider HB 322. This is a transparent effort to censor teaching and the sharing of scholarship about race relations and history in the United States. You are being asked to further a national effort to censor inquiry. I encourage you to oppose this well-funded attack on the important work of our institutions of public education.

We are not fooled by the message that this is driven by “honest parental concern” or “real issues confronting children in the classroom.” Since March of 2021, a powerful and well financed effort has whipped up hysteria about how students from kindergarten through college are being taught about the racial history and present in the United States. This began when a guy named Christopher Rufo, driven by desperation about his declining career as an influencer on the right, named everything from the [1619 Project](#) published in the New York Times to implicit bias training, to diversity projects as “critical race theory.” Picking up on Rufo’s genius in reducing two centuries of scholarship into a scary phrase, the Koch Brothers, the [American Legislative Exchange Council](#), and Republican state legislators wrote legislation to further state surveillance in classrooms and to censor education about race and racial history. The rationale is that teaching about “whiteness” makes white children feel bad and that teaching about “divisive concepts” encourages children to hate themselves and others.

Rufo successfully whipped up a “moral panic.” Moral panics are defined as moments when a threat that is not real comes to be felt as real by a significant part of the population. Because the threat is felt, not actual, moral panics are hard to respond to in the moment. In the age of the internet, they feed on a steady diet of decontextualized comments and clipped videos distributed on social media that are then used as “evidence” of a lurking danger.

The Red Scare of the 1950’s is a good example of a moral panic. Most people now acknowledge that the House Committee on Un-American Activities did far more harm than good. It did not find communists infiltrating the military or Hollywood. It did ruin otherwise productive careers and set the country deeply on edge.

Another example: In the 1980’s owners of daycare centers were accused of inflicting Satanic abuse on children. Innocent directors and teachers lost their jobs and even went to prison in a modern-day replay of the Salem Witch Trials.

This particular moral panic (not against communists in the state department or Satanists in daycare centers, but against scholarship and literature about racial history) has resulted in deeply uninformed bursts of outrage in school board meetings and legislative hearings.

322 does not mention Critical Race Theory, using “divisive concepts” and other vague, all-purpose phrases to reference inquiry and scholarship the sponsors disagree with. It does not matter what language the authors use. The intent is the same: to chill speech, inquiry, discussion, and scholarship that the sponsors disagree with. Further, consider the impetus for such legislation: a moral panic skillfully whipped up to suppress inquiry about issues proponents do not want discussed.

Don’t dumb down Ohio education by passing legislation such as HB 322. The reality is that the only thing anyone has to fear from the kind of inquiry that would be suppressed by these bills is being challenged to question assumptions about racial progress in the United States. Trying to legislate these ideas out of existence is like being afraid one’s own shadow and trying to legislate against the sun; the shadow of slavery and racism is will not be legislated away by silencing scholars and teachers. Being afraid of alternative (“controversial) versions of our history will not save us. Shining light on them and deepening our awareness of ongoing racial injustice might.

Please, as you consider HB 322, think about where you stand on censorship. Protecting the principles of academic freedom, especially in this case against legislative overreach, is key to educating our youth to be courageous and creative thinkers and citizens. All kinds of untruths gain traction in democratic societies and create moral panics (“there are communists running the State Department” and “Satanists prey on children in daycare centers”). But the effects of moral panics can be mitigated. Let’s mitigate the effects of this one. Please vote against passage of HB 322 so we can get onto the real problems we face together as educators, students, and legislators.