

Opponent Testimony for House Bill 322 OR House Bill 327
Akii Butler, Student Organizer, Ohio Student Association
State and Local Government Committee
9/20/2021

Chairman Wiggam, Vice Chairwoman John, Ranking Member Kelly, and Members of the State and Local Government Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Akii Butler. I am a student organizer with the Ohio Student Association and I strongly oppose both HB322 and HB327

As a student organizer but more so an Ohio citizen, I oppose these bills because they are a slap in the face to every citizen in this state. One of my biggest issues with these bills is that they make it seem as if discussion of these so-called “divisive concepts” -- race, religion, gender and more -- constitutes an attack on students. As if talking about America’s true history somehow hurts students when in fact teaching them an accurate history of this country can only help them. There has been a lot of talk about critical race theory, so I would like to touch on that. To quote Kimberle Crenshaw, the Black woman who coined it, Critical Race Theory is the 40 year old framework to help explain America. In order to make sense of America, you have to take seriously the role of race and racism in American society. I say that because this term has been used as a dog whistle to rile people up. I assure you that no one in grades K-12 is learning about CRT. CRT is an upper level graduate course, so if any third grader is in a class learning about this, I want to give a shoutout to that third grader because that child is a genius if they can understand it. So the fact that there has been a campaign of propaganda to scare people, is upsetting and very disrespectful to the folks who have dedicated their work to deepening our understanding of the impact of race and racism on this country.

These bills seek to prohibit the teaching of certain topics, when what we really need to do is teach more about them. I have been in Ohio since I was three years old. Throughout my time in school (K-12) I went to three different school districts. Youngstown City Schools, Liberty Local Schools, and Hubbard Exempted Village Schools district. While each was very different in terms of education, one thing that remained the same was the teaching of history. Black history was not taught very much -- each district touched on slavery, the Civil War, a bit on the Reconstruction era, the Civil Rights movement and then boom, Obama is president! I learned the same thing over and over and over. I even took an Advanced Placement government class and an Advanced Placement U.S. history class.

While they did teach a tiny bit more of Black history, it was still the absolute bare minimum. It wasn't until I got to college and I decided to do some outside learning that I actually learned about other leaders within the Civil Rights movement, and certain issues that affected Black Americans as a whole. I bring this up because many black students in America feel the same way. We feel that we learned the absolute bare minimum in terms of Black history. Now I understand that you feel these topics should be taught impartially but how can American slavery be taught impartially? Should we really be teaching the perspective of people who thought enslaving millions of Black people was good somehow? I understand most of you may feel that we need to move on, but until we actually address these issues and address them correctly and accurately the healing process that you all desperately want, won't be able to start.

Lastly, to attack higher education institutions is just downright wrong. I was lucky enough to attend Kent State University, a university with a rich history. One of the things Kent prides itself on is having a Pan African Studies Department. Through this department I was able to take classes such as Black Experience, Malcolm & Martin, and more. This department is important to so many people and if these bills are passed, it might stifle free speech as well as deny students the accuracy of what they are learning. And I know that race isn't just an issue here, so my concern turns to the May 4th center at Kent State University, which tells the truth about what actually happened on May 4th, 1970, when the Ohio national guard was called to KSU. Would you block funding for that or require teachers to share the perspective that it was justifiable to kill four students that day? There is important history in this country and in this very state that needs to be taught.

As a student organizer and as a former student and a citizen of Ohio, I ask you to strongly consider my testimony opposing HB 322 and HB 327 and vote NO on these bills.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any additional questions or provide input as needed.

Respectfully submitted,

Akii Butler

Student Organizer

Ohio Student Association