

## Ohio House Bill 103, “To establish the Ohio Social Studies Standards Task Force to develop new social studies academic standards”

Testimony of Jonathan W. Pidluzny, Ph.D., America First Policy Institute

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It is a privilege to provide testimony to the Ohio House of Representatives Committee on Primary and Secondary Education. Thank you, Chairman Bird, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the committee.

The America First Policy Institute (AFPI) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute. Our guiding principles are liberty, free enterprise, foreign-policy engagement in the American interest, freedom of conscience, and the primacy of American workers, families, and communities. To this end, AFPI affirms and celebrates the American experiment and works to promulgate American values in our educational institutions, public policy, and culture.

Before joining AFPI as Director of the Higher Education Reform Initiative, I was vice president of Academic Affairs at the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, where we worked to improve civic literacy by improving civics education. Before that, I taught American Politics at Morehead State University in Kentucky for ten years. The cultural prerequisites of successful liberal democracies, including civics education, was one focus of my academic research.<sup>1</sup>

The crisis of civic literacy facing the country has been well-documented. Survey research has shown that only 36% of Americans know which branch of government declares war, fewer than half (45%) know that the 19th Amendment guarantees women the right to vote, and only 15% can correctly identify James Madison as the “Father of the Constitution.”<sup>2</sup> When the Institute for Citizens & Scholars tested 41,000 Americans with a multiple-choice version of the U.S. Citizenship test, only 37% earned a passing score (60% or above). Fifty-nine percent of Ohio respondents earned a failing grade. (Only 4% earned an “A,” and just 9% scored a “B.”)<sup>3</sup>

Ohio House Bill 103 is responding to this urgent problem. Where the voting public understands the country’s history, governmental institutions, political principles, and the policy problems it faces, representative government will be better informed and better calibrated to advance the public

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Murray Bessette and I have written about the American Founders’ views on the importance of civic education and their general expectation that it would remain a state and local priority: “[I]t is not that the Federalists believed civic virtue and civic education to be unimportant or dispensable. If they did not underline the importance of civic character frequently or emphatically, it is because public education generally—though a precondition for good government at every level, including the national level—was nonetheless to remain the responsibility of the states. It seems, moreover, that they implicitly assumed society would do a tolerably good job in the arena absent concrete initiatives on the part of the federal government.” Pidluzny, J, and Bessette, M. (2019). “Avarice and Ambition in America: The Founders’ Debate on the Political Place of the Selfish Passions in the Constitutional Order of the United States,” *Markets and Morality*, 22: 1 (Spring, 2019), p. 136.

<sup>2</sup> American Council of Trustees and Alumni (2019). *America’s Knowledge Crisis: A Survey of Civic Literacy*. Retrieved April 30, 2023, from <https://www.goacta.org/wp-content/uploads/ee/download/ACTA-Civic-Survey-2019.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Institute for Citizens & Scholars (2019). *National Survey Finds Just 1 in 3 Americans Would Pass Citizenship Test*. Retrieved April 30, 2023, from <https://citizensandscholars.org/resource/national-survey-finds-just-1-in-3-americans-would-pass-citizenship-test/>

interest. Individual citizens must understand their rights, responsibilities, and what freedom is and where it came from, or it will be hard for future generations to perpetuate our constitutional system of government.

Improving civic literacy is important for other reasons too. The deepening societal divisions and coarsening public dialogue we are witnessing today are serious threats to constitutional government. Both problems are caused by the erosion of common understanding in the citizenry, which is attributable in important part to the deterioration of civics education. Shared understanding—rooted in history and political principles but extending to the policy challenges we face—is necessary to inform and refine public discourse in a democratic society. Disagreement will still exist when we improve civic literacy. But when disagreement is informed by a shared fact-based context, deliberation about the problems facing our communities will be civil and productive. This improves democratic policymaking and, over time, can be expected to increase confidence in our public institutions and political leaders.

That is why getting social standards right is so vitally important—today more than ever. HB 103 would require the Ohio Social Studies Standards Task Force to develop statewide social studies standards for K–12 based on the *American Birthright* model.

The *American Birthright* model provides truly outstanding guidance for the development of K-12 social studies standards and curricula.

The *American Birthright* model standards are academically rigorous. They were developed by the Civics Alliance in consultation with dozens of academic content experts, education policy leaders, public leaders, and educators. They include content drawn from a range of disciplines, including history, geography, political science, constitutional studies, and economics. American history is *American Birthright's* center of gravity. Students learn about the American Founding and the ideas that inspired it, key moments in the country's political development (including Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement), the evolution of free market capitalism, the influence of important Supreme Court decisions, consequential public policy debates up through the present, and much more. But the standards also include well-selected topics in world history, international relations, the history of ideas spanning cultures and centuries, and beyond.

The standards are designed to provide a valuable guide for educators without being overly rigid or prescriptive. *American Birthright* is not a set series of lesson plans but, rather, an incredibly well-curated array of essential topics and tour of priority learning objectives. They are carefully aligned by grade level and build each year on students' understanding of the United States and the world, making them developmentally appropriate for students throughout K–12. Many integrate the primary documents every American should be familiar with—and which inspire debate without imposing a viewpoint—from the U.S. Constitution and Declaration of Independence to the Fourteenth Amendment and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham City Jail." If they are adopted, a great deal of important work will be left for the model standards task force and curriculum designers in Ohio, to calibrate *American Birthright* to the state's specific needs and priorities.

*American Birthright* is fact intensive, apolitical, and honest. The model standards require students to learn about the evils and atrocities in American and European history—so necessary to instill reflective citizenship, humility, and a desire to build a more perfect Union for our children. In 10th

grade, students learn with a view to describing “the causes of 19th-century European imperialism.”<sup>4</sup> In 11th grade, students must be able to “describe and analyze the long-distance effects of European colonization on North American peoples” and the “[o]pposition of Southern whites to Reconstruction.”<sup>5</sup> In 12th grade, students are asked to “identify and explain successful... and failed... historical efforts to narrow discrepancies between the foundational ideas and values of American democracy and the realities of American political and civic life.”<sup>6</sup>

Students who complete K–12 curricula guided by these standards will learn about a true diversity of cultures, peoples, and ideas. In 6th grade, students are asked to “state when modern African countries became independent nations” and “explain how independence was achieved in at least two countries in this region.”<sup>7</sup> In 10th grade, they learn about “the life and teachings of Confucius” and “significant aspects of Islamic belief.”<sup>8</sup> The primary source appendices include works ranging from Czech dissident Vaclav Havel’s *The Power of the Powerless* to Avicenna’s *The Book of Healing* and Buddha’s *First Sermon*. And that is only the beginning.

*American Birthright* is an unexpectedly exciting read. I hope everyone considers it carefully in preparation to provide public input to the task force envisioned by HB 103, as the legislation will require if it is successful. The range of topics will remind you how exhilarating it was to learn about this country’s remarkable history for the first time: the uniqueness of the American Founding, the long struggle to live up to its defining ideals, the country’s evolving place in the world, and America’s promise to future generations. It will also remind you how much you have forgotten and perhaps prompt you to revisit topics and ideas you have not made time for in years. Learning along with a son or daughter—working their way through curricula based on the *American Birthright* model—would be great fun. Imagine what the entire family would learn by watching one well-aligned documentary film at home every week!

*American Birthright* also illustrates that social studies education can be a unifying force in society. The model standards live up to the Civics Alliance’s “pedagogical rules of thumb,” which include providing students with “an extensive catalog of facts” and basing “historical instruction on primary sources.”<sup>9</sup> The model standards also reflect the values that informed their development: “historical integrity,” “impartiality,” “humility,” “broadmindedness,” and “charitable interpretation.”<sup>10</sup> A curriculum based on the standards will teach students the same important values, which are also civic virtues.

It is no wonder *American Birthright* has been endorsed by dozens of respected organizations. In states that adopt the standards, K–12 social studies curricula will become a shared treasure—providing a common understanding and framework for reasonable public discourse. And for many students, inspiration to life-long learning.

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<sup>4</sup> Civics Alliance (2022). “American Birthright: The Civics Alliance’s Model K-12 Social Studies Standards,” *The National Association of Scholars*, p. 113. Retrieved April 30, 2023, from <https://civicsalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/AmericanBirthright.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.