

Opponent Testimony for House Bill 103

Elizabeth Kenyon, Professor of Social Studies Education, Kent State University

Primary and Secondary House Committee

May 15, 2023

Chairman Bird, Vice Chairwoman Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Representative Robinson and Members of the Primary and Secondary Education Committee,

Thank you for receiving my written witness testimony. My Name is Elizabeth Kenyon

I am writing in opposition to House Bill 103.

As a parent of Ohio public school students and as an elementary social studies teacher educator, I am writing with concerns about the creation of a task force to align Ohio's social studies standards with the American Birthright Citizenship Model Standards. I am an associate professor of social studies education at Kent State University; however, I do not write on behalf of the institution but as a concerned citizen.

While I agree that social studies education could be improved in Ohio, the proposed task force is not what is needed. The state of Ohio already has an agreed upon process involving many stakeholders that works within the many tensions of the interested communities to create meaningful and substantive standards to guide Ohio's teachers. The new task force would undermine the hard work of this already established process.

What is lacking is the support for teaching social studies, particularly at the elementary level. The focus on literacy, language arts, and math for the purposes of standardized tests has all but eliminated social studies instruction from many elementary schools. I see this every semester when on average about half of my students, who are doing field hours in a wide variety of area elementary schools report that they see no social studies instruction at all. Another handful see it only every other Friday or only when the latest Scholastic magazine has arrived. Middle school social studies teachers have noted this lack of instruction as they find the basic building blocks of understanding that are established in the early grades are not there when students arrive to sixth grade.

Instead of a task force to create new standards we need a task force to explore how to better implement the standards we have through integration of subject areas in the elementary years and through enforcing dedicated social studies time for all grades and students in Ohio. Indeed, many of the facts that proponents of the bill disparaged people not knowing are in the already existing standards. It is not the standards that need to be fixed, it is the quantity and quality of social studies education and support for that education that needs to be addressed.

Another concern I have with this task force is the standards they seek to align with. In the early grades, particularly K-3, the standards are full of memorized facts and locations that students will not only dislike learning but will also soon forget. Research has shown that social studies is retained when it is meaningful and purposeful to students (NCSS, 2017). That is why in many ways the standard Ohio already has are so rich in both their concept and flexibility. The existing standards do an excellent job of preparing students for citizenship and life in Ohio and most of all, continued learning. The American Birthright Citizenship Standards lean heavily on bits of content knowledge and are very light on skills and fostering the skills and thinking necessary for further learning and citizenship. For example, the current Ohio standards focus on students being able to identify and learn from primary sources. Students are asked to reflect on how physical characteristics of a place impact the ways people live, and how humans impact their environments. They are asked to consider how people in a community work together towards common goals. None of these foundational understandings are present in the standards framework for grades K-3 of the American Birthright Citizenship Standards.

Furthermore, the people who testified as proponents of this bill on May 9th claimed that the American Birthright Citizenship Standards are a return to neutrality. As someone who thinks and reads deeply about social studies education, I would contend that a completely neutral curriculum is impossible. Some curricula may be more neutral than others, but complete neutrality is an impossibility because curriculum makers and teachers always must select what content will be shared and what will be omitted since it is impossible to teach all the historical, geographic, civic, or economic knowledge that exists. That is why the skills of knowing how these disciplines create their knowledge, of being able to critically consider the content they receive and question and explore multiple perspectives is an essential component of working against indoctrination and bias.

This task force will waste time and resources that could be used to meaningfully improve social studies education in the state. I encourage you to read both the existing standards and the proposed standards before voting on this. I am sure people will see that the existing standards, when taught well, are more than sufficient for high quality social studies education in Ohio.

Respectfully submitted,

Elizabeth Kenyon

Associate Professor of Social Studies Education
Kent State University
Citizen of Ohio

Reference:

National Council for Social Studies 2017 Position Statement on Powerful, Purposeful Pedagogy in Elementary Social Studies: <https://www.socialstudies.org/position-statements/powerful-purposeful-pedagogy-elementary-school-social-studies>

