

Written Testimony of Jan Nesor, PhD
Before the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee
Rep Adam Bird, Chair
May 15, 2023

Chair Bird, Vice Chair Fowler, Ranking Member Richardson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee.

My name is Jan Nesor, and I am a professor of Education Policy at the Ohio State University. I do not represent Ohio State. Rather I am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to HB 103.

On February 14, 2023 the Civics Alliance, a spin-off of the National Association of Scholars, and populated by various right-wing actors including oil company executives, fossil fuel deniers, and right wing think tanks, published its "American Birthright Taskforce Act," which "provides model language so that state policymakers can create a social studies task force, appointed by the governor and the state legislature, to draft social studies standards based on *American Birthright: The Civics Alliance's Model K-12 Social Studies Standards*.¹ State policymakers may use this Act to establish *American Birthright* directly, rather than work through (too-often heel-dragging) state education departments"² Reps. Jones and Richardson draw on this model for the language in Ohio HB103, introduced on March 14.³

The proposed legislation raises many issues, but in the interest of brevity I address only two: The process proposed for adopting the *American Birthright* standards, and the content and quality of those standards.

HB103 does not define a process for developing social studies and history standards. It describes an implementation process to impose a set of standards created without any input from educators or parents in Ohio. The idea that the proposed task force, entirely appointed by one political party, will result in substantive change to the *American Birthright* standards is implausible. The time frame is a mere 90 days, input is limited to parents of school children and school personnel -- though not necessarily representing public schools—and there is no explanation of how many meetings would be held, where they would be held, or what kind of "input" would be allowed.

In fact, "Task forces" of this kind are political theater "through which elites carry out the strategies that seek to attain their goals" (Holland et al., 2007, p. 156). They allow elites to control the issues that can be raised, define who can be involved and how they can be involved, and block or ignore

¹ The standards can be downloaded as a pdf: <https://civicsalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/AmericanBirthright.pdf>

² <https://civicsalliance.org/the-civics-alliance-has-published-a-new-social-studies-taskforce-act/>

³ This kind of "policy plagiarism" is commonplace, see Dorrell, R. and Jansa, J. (2022) Copy, paste, legislate, succeed? The effect of policy plagiarism on policy success, *Policy & Politics*, vol XX, no XX, 1–19, DOI: 10.1332/030557321X16445954252430; see also <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/is-ikea-the-new-model-for-the-conservative-movement>

“the presence and statements of those who dissent against majority opinions or decisions” (ibid).⁴ Combined with the lack of proposed funding, this will be a pro forma exercise and the end product will be close or identical to the current published *Birthright* standards. That is the idea.

One might argue that this is okay if the standards themselves are excellent. They are not.

HB 103 begins from the implicit premise that the existing Ohio history and social standards are inadequate. Representative Jones says they "are vague, open-ended and lack in academic rigor."

Here is an example of a content statement from those current Ohio High School Social Studies Standards:

TOPIC: INDUSTRIALIZATION AND PROGRESSIVISM (1877-1920)

Ignited by post-Civil War demand and fueled by technological advancements, large-scale industrialization began in the United States during the late 1800s. Growing industries enticed foreign immigration, fostered urbanization, gave rise to the American labor movement and developed the infrastructure that facilitated the settling of the West. A period of progressive reform emerged in response to political corruption and practices of big business.

CONTENT STATEMENTS:

- 8. The rise of corporations, heavy industry, mechanized farming and technological innovations transformed the American economy from an agrarian to an increasingly urban industrial society.*
- 9. The rise of industrialization led to a rapidly expanding workforce. Labor organizations grew amidst unregulated working conditions, laissez-faire policies toward big business, and violence toward supporters of organized labor.*
- 10. Immigration, internal migration and urbanization transformed American life.*
- 11. Continued settlement by Americans in the West intensified conflict with American Indians and reinforced the policy of the reservation system.*
- 12. Following Reconstruction, old political and social structures reemerged and racial discrimination was institutionalized.*
- 13. The Progressive era was an effort to address the ills of American society stemming from industrial capitalism, urbanization and political corruption.*

Here by contrast is a parallel section from *American Birthright*⁵

Industrial America and Its Emerging Role in International Affairs, 1870–1920

- 47. Explain the various causes of the Industrial Revolution. (H, E)*
 - a. The economic impetus provided by the Civil War*
 - b. Important technological and scientific advances*
 - c. The role of business leaders, entrepreneurs, and inventors such as Alexander Graham Bell, Andrew Carnegie, Thomas Edison, J.P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, and Cornelius Vanderbilt*
- 48. Explain the important consequences of the Industrial Revolution. (H, E)*
 - a. The growth of big business*
 - b. Environmental consequences*
 - c. Increased life expectancy, population growth, the expansion of cities*

⁴ Holland, D., Lutz, C., Bartlett, L., Frederick-McGlathery, M., Guldbrandsen, T. C., Murillo, E. G., & Nonini, D. M. (2007). *Local democracy under siege: Activism, public interests, and private politics*. NYU Press.

⁵ For criticisms of Birthright by the National Council of the Social Studies, see <https://www.socialstudies.org/current-events-response/ncss-statement-american-birthright-civics-alliances-model-k-12-social> For the perspective of the American Historical Society, see <https://www.historians.org/research-and-publications/perspectives-on-history/may-2023/maintaining-standards-recent-aha-contributions-to-the-fight-for-honest-history-education>

- d. *Anti-monopolism and the rise of economic regulation*
 - e. *Higher living standards*
- Seminal Primary Documents to Read: William Graham Sumner, "The Forgotten Man" (1883)*
49. *Describe American culture between 1865 and 1914. (H)*
- a. *Writers such as Louisa May Alcott, Emily Dickinson, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, and Edith Wharton.*
 - b. *Artists such as Winslow Homer, Charles Dana Gibson, Frederic Remington, and John Singer Sargent*
 - c. *Minstrel shows, vaudeville, Chautauquas, and circuses*
 - d. *Mass culture, including cheap novels, professional sports teams, amusement parks, Tin Pan Alley, and jazz music*
- Seminal Primary Documents to Read: Ernest Thayer, Casey at the Bat (1888)*

The current standards are **not** vague or open-ended, although they do give trained social studies educators the ability to draw on the most up-to-date materials and methods appropriate for their particular population of students.

By contrast the *American Birthright* standards **are** vague (e.g., "environmental consequences"), incorrect in part (in implying that the "industrial revolution" started after the American Civil War), focus inordinate attention on a handful of inventors and Robber Barons while excluding representatives of the majority of the population, and have 11th grade students reading "Casey at the Bat" – all of this, according to Rep. Jones, "a return to America's bedrock principles."

I strongly disagree. The *Birthright* standards don't reflect my principles or those of many other Americans. HB103 defines a flawed process and promotes a radical and wretchedly inadequate curriculum. I urge you to vote no and reject HB103

Sincerely,

Jan Nespor