

Opponent testimony for HB616
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To Chairman Wiggam, Vice Chair John, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the House State & Local Government Committee, thank you for this opportunity to provide opponent testimony on House Bill 616.

My name is Derek Burtch and I am here in my capacity as a teacher, a parent, and executive director of the educational nonprofit Erase the Space. Of these three identities, I have held the title of teacher the longest. I have just finished my 14th year teaching in the state of Ohio having spent 6 years at North Union High School in Richwood, 7 years at Olentangy Liberty High School in Powell, and am currently teaching at Olentangy High School in Lewis Center. My son just turned two and a half, so I am still very much learning what it means to be a parent. As a parent, I hope that my son can be part of an ongoing conversation of learning and growth, but this legislation makes me think he'll be part of a dying conversation avoiding the uncomfortable facts about our history and current existence.

I have tried to keep these conversations alive in my classroom because students have consistently let teachers know that they want to have these tough conversations. Under this proposed bill, I would likely be fired within three class periods. In my classroom hangs a flag. It's yellow with navy blue stencil lettering and made entirely of felt. My students look at it every day, and by the end of the year start to recognize why it is there. It reads, "Comfort is a slow death." Any real learning comes from discomfort, navigating through the feelings of what it means to not know something or think differently, and coming out the other side with a new understanding. After all, everyone in this room knows what real learning is. We feel it when it happens. It's a journey, not a set of preapproved talking points meant to fence in curiosity.

This bill references racism and ignores the systemic aspects of power that created it in the first place. To call something inherently racist, it has to fit within the definition of racism. So let's draw from some common sources. Dictionary.com, "a person who believes in racism, the doctrine that one's own racial group is superior or that a particular racial group is inferior to the others." I'll add a second one for context, this time from Webster-Mirriam, "having, reflecting, or fostering the belief that race is a fundamental determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race." Both of these definitions address the power inherent in racism wielded by a particular group based on a racial hierarchy.

Through this redefinition of the term racist, this bill is essentially targeting and erasing conversations that center the experiences of BIPOC students and their families (something they specifically asked teachers for during the summer of 2020 through anonymous Instagram accounts across the state). This bill is also targeting and erasing conversations, lessons, or classroom materials that represent LGBTQ+ students, their families, or students that are part of LGBTQ+ families, another demographic that is underrepresented and unprotected at school.

Most of all, this bill aims to foster comfort for white students to not have to face these realities and have these conversations. There is nothing about CRT, intersectionality, DEI work, or the 1619 project that is meant to make white students feel guilty. If someone aims to do that, they're doing harm, and should probably work with an expert to understand how to facilitate productive conversations in the classroom. The learning and growth opportunities for this generation are so much more available than any I had growing up, which means our opportunities for progress as a nation are much more within reach. This bill would put them out of reach.

The censorship of necessary conversations in classrooms, especially with the student population I have worked with for 14 years—teenagers, will only feed into the existing violence which disproportionately falls on the minoritized identities of BIPOC and LGBTQ+ people. Hate crimes against Jewish people, Black people, and the LGBTQ+ community have surged in recent years and continue to rise as 2022 rolls on, one of the more recent mass shootings, a phrase that pains me to write, focused on a conspiracy theory targeting Jewish and Black Americans.

I am not alone in coming to this understanding, the News Literacy Project, a nonpartisan educational nonprofit, states, "Our education system must teach young people about conspiracy theories that can lead individuals to fall for false narratives that have violent, real-world consequences. News literacy education helps people learn to think critically and gain the skills to be smart, active consumers of news and other information and engaged participants in a democracy." Under this bill, critical thinking about false narratives, and about the critical conversations that need to be had in order to address them, would be stifled and punishable if teachers dared to engage students. So, who is this protecting?

Does it protect teachers? No. Does it protect students? No. Because even if you think you are protecting white students, you are doing more damage to them by keeping them from the growth possible by engaging in the larger world outside their privilege. Diversity is good. Science proves that it is over and over again. It's good for forests. It's good for the oceans. And it's good and healthy for human beings. Check my sources if you want: National Institute for the Humanities, University of California at Berkeley, Columbia University. The list goes on. What diversity is not good for is monopolies. Like the monopoly on information and power currently being wielded by those who introduced and support this bill.

Oh, and if you talk to any elementary school teacher K-3, they don't teach gender and sexuality. And if it's pronouns the proponents of this bill have a problem with, I suggest you find a better use for your time and effort because we have elementary schools being targeted and children dying in front of us. Parents can have their own conversations about pronouns in conjunction with teachers asking students theirs if they want to, but can we focus more on trying to save students' lives rather than saving them from facts or just a question?

I ask that you reconsider your positions on this legislation. Be curious about what all these opponents have to say rather than viewing us as a barrier to the political clout that may or may not come from the passage of this bill. Please, wonder: why do we care so much?

Elementary teachers don't teach gender and sexuality! Oh, did someone get sad that teachers ask for pronouns? Sounds like some snowflakes have issues with teachers doing their due diligence.

We are forbidden from learning how to create welcoming spaces for a diverse student population and are, by other introduced legislation, mandatory reporters to violate the privacy of the most vulnerable population at school.

Restricting district funding to rat on teachers. Ruin public education

I mean to ban all diversity equity and inclusion training especially for teachers would do the opposite of what students asked for.

Summer of 2020 accounts of racism in schools...

Maybe even something from our investigation with teachers, what I wrote...

The other day in class, we talked about the shooting in Buffalo. How does this discussion look under this proposed law? I'm fired or these students don't have a place to discuss this horrific event? No chance to investigate the racist conspiracy rampant on Facebook? What the fuck is school for?

the News Literacy Project — a nonpartisan national education nonprofit *"Our education system must teach young people about conspiracy theories that can lead individuals to fall for false narratives that have violent, real-world consequences. News literacy education helps people learn to think critically and gain the skills to be smart, active consumers of news and other information and engaged participants in a democracy."*

Statistics on ppl killed based on ignorance and hate.

NYT- About 64.9 percent of the 8,052 reported hate crime incidents that year were based on race, ethnicity or ancestry bias, according to the F.B.I. Within that category, Black Americans made up more than half of the victims.

The number of reported hate crimes against African Americans in 2020 was 2,871, up from 1,972 in 2019. That spike drove a nearly 9.1 percent increase in hate crimes overall. In the five years before 2019, African Americans were victims in about half of all the race, ethnicity or ancestry bias cases, according to F.B.I. data.

Them- Nedra Sequence Morris's murder is at least the 14th such killing of a trans person in the U.S. this year, and the second Black trans woman killed in Florida

since Duval Princess was found dead in Jacksonville on January 3. Though we can't yet confirm the killer's motive, it's hard not to draw a link between both women's deaths and the violent rhetoric Florida Republicans have thrown at LGBTQ+ people and trans women specifically — the principal offender being Gov. Ron DeSantis, whose administration has led the charge in slandering queer adults as pedophiles and "groomers."

- Anecdote about students talking about GSA that John told me

CBS- Hate crimes against Jewish people in New York City surged last month, more than quadrupling in February compared to same month last year, according to New York Police Department statistics.

Police logged 56 suspected antisemitic hate crimes citywide in February, up from 11 in February 2021. In January there were 15 such crimes recorded by police. The spike in antisemitic crimes comes amid rising hate incidents against multiple groups in New York, including increases in anti-Asian and anti-Black attacks, as well as crimes targeting people for their sexual orientation.

Compare this bill to the language in Florida's, Tennessee's... ALEC? Do the representatives involved even write the legislation? Frankenstein's monster of a bill. Interestingly enough, the monster in that book was an allegory for the industrial revolution. How divisive.

Copied language from Florida and Tennessee bills calls into question the legitimacy of seriousness this bill is being taken. Representative Wiggam is the State Chairman for ALEC, a network of legislators copying legislation pushed from a national perspective. Is this right for Ohio?

Language comes from Citizens for Renewing America model legislation.

Could come from the Alliance for Free Citizens: Model Teaching Racial and Universal Equality (TRUE) Act

MHJF writing points: Giving teachers space, spread the work out, spread the word, spread the impact, spread out the topics

For Glennon's idea: Columbus Urban League, MORPC,

Broken Language book