

The Politicization of History Education in Oregon

Statement Opposing HB 2023 (2019)
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Oregon Senate Committee on Education Public Hearing of May 1, 2019, 1:00 p.m.
Oregon State Capitol, Room HR B, Salem, OR
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Last Revised: 30 April 2019

Executive Summary

- HB 2023 politicizes the teaching of history and related subjects in Oregon
- HB 2023 subverts school board autonomy in choosing curricular materials
- HB 2023 will worsen discrimination and stereotyping in schools
- HB 2023 will divert already insufficient time for history and civics education
- HB 2023 lacks legislative analysis and blindly copies California
- HB 2023 turns public education into a political spoils system
- HB 2023 will contribute to the decay of excellence in public education in Oregon

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Overview

Under the misleading banner of “inclusive education”, HB 2023 proposes to mandate changes in curricula for history and related subjects in Oregon to give more weight to a select set of social groups. This attempt to legislate historical knowledge and pedagogy is a further step in the direction of politicization and centralization of public education in Oregon. It undermines teacher and school board autonomy, creates a *de facto* entitlement program for certain groups, and will heighten rather than address problems of social disintegration in the state. The lack of policy analysis for the bill as well as its explicit copying of California legislation¹ are additional grounds for concern. The continued attempts by some politicians in Salem to impose their contemporary ideological agenda onto public education will undermine trust and ultimately taxpayer support for public education in Oregon.

Key Points of HB 2023

House Bill 2023 directs district school boards and the State Board of Education to ensure that beginning in 2026 the teaching of history, geography, economics, and civics includes mandatory coverage of the “histories, contributions, and perspectives” of people belonging to certain social groups. The list of groups has been given, without explanation, by the legislature as: Native American, African, Asian, Pacific Island, Chicano, Latino, Middle Eastern; women; disabled; immigrants or refugees; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. Other identifiable groups with

¹ HB 2023 STAFF MEASURE SUMMARY House Committee On Education

well-known roles in the state’s history – French-Canadians, Russians, civil war veterans, Scots-Irish, Missourians, for instance – are not included in the select list.

Politicization of History

By using contemporary identity politics to impose mandates onto school curricula, HB 2023 politicizes the teaching of subjects that should be left to the open and accountable search for truth and excellence. For any given historical phenomena, whether a given social group was historically relevant (for good or ill), made any contribution, or had any distinct and homogenous “perspective” is a matter for empirical inquiry, not something to be determined by politicians in Salem. Moreover, by attempting to reconfigure social studies education along lines of group entitlement, the legislation subverts the very essence of history, economics, and related studies in which broad forces relating to ideas, technological change, and institutions may be the most important factors. The bill is redolent of Soviet-style rewriting of history according to predetermined pseudo-Marxist categories intended to serve political purposes through “mythologized representations” of certain groups.² It has no place in a free society. The bill provides little or no justification for this political mandate for the re-writing of history education, nor does it explain why certain groups have been favored with inclusion while others have not.

Related Recent Legislation

The ideological thrust of the bill in line with a narrowly construed identity politics agenda is a serious disservice to the interests of students and educators. HB 2023 follows a recent series of legislative mandates in education intended to advance partisan political goals rather than encourage excellence in education. These include HB 2845 (2017) mandating “ethnic studies” courses in all Oregon public schools despite the intellectual hollowness of such fields; SB 664 (2019) mandating education on “prejudice, racism and stereotyping” under the guise of genocide education; HB 2864 (2017) mandating “cultural competency” training in higher education against all evidence of its malign effects; and HB 3308 (2015) mandating support for struggling college students only if they belong to certain races and identities, an explicitly prejudiced law that harkens back to the worst legislative excesses of Oregon history. The cumulative effect of this legislation is to increasingly transform public education in Oregon at both the k-12 and tertiary levels into a group-based entitlement program rather than a civic space of training, excellence, and citizenship.

Subversion of School Board and Teacher Autonomy

HB 2023 subverts the autonomy of district school boards to choose and adjust their teaching materials in history and related subjects based on local circumstances and needs. It also robs classroom teachers of the same autonomy at the micro-level. A teacher in Baker City, for instance, may want to make use of the National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center as the centerpiece for social studies learning in a given year. The Interpretive Center’s learning modules develop crucial educational skills including critical thinking, problem-solving, economic analysis, and the use of primary sources. However, they fail to discuss the “perspectives” or “contributions” of the checklist of groups in HB 2023. Teachers will lose such

² Slawoj Szynkiewicz, “Mythologized Representations in Soviet Thinking on the Nationalities Problem,” *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Apr., 1990); Terry Martin. *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.

autonomy as they direct attention to the stream of group-identity of mandates from Salem. Changing school district curricula and methods is extremely difficult without the willing support and planning of teachers. The new law may simply be ignored and would reduce morale among teachers, administrators, and parents. Autonomy for curricular decisions should remain at the level of school district boards.

Degradation of Learning

HB 2023 further imposes impossible demands on classroom teachers. The limited instructional time available, for instance, to provide Oregon students with the barest essential learning about the origins and development of the state will be drained as teachers scramble to make sure they have covered such state-mandated topics as “the transgender contribution to Oregon history” and “the Latino perspective on the fur trade.” The Oregon Education Association claims in its support of the bill that it will help educators “to help students develop a healthy sense of self and form respect for each other through the process of learning about shared experiences, commonalities, and differences.”³ There is no evidence that group identity-based curricula do anything except encourage a healthy cynicism among students about the false stories they are being offered in the classroom as part of a centralized social control system.

Political Spoils System

HB 2023 uses the educational curriculum as a form of political spoils system. This is, in the words of one scholar, the greatest threat to history teaching in the United States.⁴ The result is that historical scholarship and teaching, rather than being driven by the demands of truth, excellence, and knowledge is instead driven by the demands of group-based entitlements and patron-client reward systems. Through HB 2023, the Oregon legislature is in effect providing benefits in the form of “recognition in the curriculum” much as feudal lords used to allocate honorifics and medals to loyal groups. This transforms policies to promote equality and opportunity from civil rights-based approaches that identify harms and offer corrective actions into patronage-based approaches that identify political gains and provide spoils to mobilized groups.⁵

Stereotyping of Group Characteristics

By conceiving of individuals in history as defined by their group identities rather than by their individual characteristics, HB 2023 contributes to what psychologists call “stereotype rationality”.⁶ Such teaching encourages students rationally to conceive of members of other groups as having a set of stereotyped traits rather than being authentic individuals. This form of instruction encourages learners to develop caricatures of different social groups and all-encompassing group-based descriptions of individuals under the group label. This form of stereotype rationality becomes even more odious when aligned to a legislative mandate that intentionally praises some groups while condemning others. The California legislation on which

³ Testimony of Kelli Horvath, Government Relations, Oregon Education Association

⁴ David Gordon, “The Joys and Sorrows of Diversity: Changes in the Historical Profession in the Last Half Century,” *Society*, April 2013, Volume 50, Issue 2, pp 140–151.

⁵ Daniel N. Lipson, “Where's the Justice? Affirmative Action's Severed Civil Rights Roots in the Age of Diversity,” *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Dec., 2008).

⁶ Stevens S.T., Jussim L., Stevens L.A., Anglin S.M. (2018) “Cultural Competence: A Form of Stereotype Rationality.” In: Frisby C., O'Donohue W. (eds) *Cultural Competence in Applied Psychology*. London: Springer.

Oregon's is modelled prohibits teaching materials from providing “adverse” depictions of any of the itemized groups. This means that only some groups may be represented in a historically accurate manner. For instance, the widely-used U.S. history textbook *The Americans* includes 242 instances of the use of the term “white/whites.” Of these, 133 (or 55%) are negative while 63 are neutral and just 46 (19%) are positive. As one high school teacher observes: “The textbook assiduously notes that slaveholders were ‘white’, but not that the Republican Congress that passed the Thirteenth Amendment was composed exclusively of white men...If *The Americans* mentions someone is ‘white,’ it’s usually to say he’s an oppressor. If a white American does something good, he has no color at all.”⁷

Social Priming of Group Differences

In addition, HB 2023 uses history to encourage “social priming” in which the imaginative potential of students to think about the various processes at work in the social world are radically narrowed and reshaped to fit into social group categories. Through “social priming”, students are trained to lose the capacity to think about historical processes as *anything other* than group-based conflicts. Through such priming, historical outcomes are attributed to group differences, conflicts, and unfair entitlements. Conflicts between European traders and native Americans in early Oregon history, for instance, are transformed from historical events driven by global trade, technology, and migration into evidence of European wickedness. This leads naturally to a worsening of the social fabric as students reconceive of themselves not as members of a universal civic republic but as members of groups with interests and worldviews that are in fundamental conflict. In this view, history becomes a puerile fantasy divided into good people and bad people. As the high school teacher wrote: “My high school students are primed to believe radical fantasies when they go to college, because they’ve been taught no fact in high school that would tell them about the real world.”

The Rethinking Schools Agenda

Public school teachers in Oregon have for decades been seeking a law like HB 2023 in order to overhaul social studies education in the state as a vehicle for their ideological activism and grievance-based identity politics. This is best represented in the radical group *Rethinking Schools*, a partner organization of Portland Public Schools whose local chapters are frequently found inside Oregon schools running events and distributing materials. *Rethinking Schools* advocates an abusive classroom agenda, taking fixed ideological positions on a range of public policy issues and “instructing” students to accept these positions rather than debate them. For instance, *Rethinking Schools* has been seeking for decades to restructure the teaching of the Oregon Trail in order to portray it as an oppressive and exploitative chapter that forms the core of Oregon history. Oregon history, in the hands of these teachers, will be taught as a history of shame and evil. In the words of a former Portland high school teacher and current managing-editor at *Rethinking Schools*, a widely-used simulation to teach students about the roles played by individuals in the Oregon Trail is “sexist, racist, culturally insensitive, and contemptuous of the earth.”⁸ The teacher, Bill Bigelow, has also authored a textbook for use in the classroom that is explicit in its aims to create a divided society in contrast to the standard textbooks that emphasize a common purpose: “There is a lot of ‘us,’ and ‘we,’ and ‘our,’ as if the texts are

⁷ “Teaching History”, Jan 07, 2019, https://www.nas.org/articles/teaching_history

⁸ Bill Bigelow, “On the Road to Cultural Bias,” *Rethinking Schools* magazine, 10:1 (1995)

trying to dissolve race, class, and gender realities into the melting pot of ‘the nation’.”⁹ Among teaching materials promoted by the group include a “genocide of native Californians role play” and another encouraging students to think of themselves “as enemies of the state” and the classroom as a “fugitive space.”¹⁰ *Rethinking Schools* is not a marginal crank organization, even though its ideas stand far outside of any mainstream thinking. HB 2023 in effect takes the *Rethinking Schools* agenda and makes it law. This should frighten anyone concerned with quality education in Oregon.

Lack of Evidence and Analysis

Like many concepts popular among educational faculty in higher education¹¹, the “inclusive education” concept used to justify HB 2023 is virtually free of evidence and has done pernicious harm to education in the country. In advocating HB 2023, the Department of Education, for instance, claimed that “The inclusion of historically underrepresented and underserved people in instructional materials...results in fewer instances of bullying.”¹² The evidence cited in support of this statement was a survey by a national gay rights advocacy group showing a correlation between the introduction of teaching materials on the gay community and a decline in homophobic remarks more than ten years later, which even the advocacy group noted “may” reflect causation given a vast number of other changes over the same period. The organization’s own evaluation reports about the effectiveness of its teaching materials provides no evidence of objective outcomes, only the subjective perceptions of teachers.¹³ Oregon’s Department of Education, in other words, has not the barest bones on which to hang an evidence-based claim for HB 2023.

Conclusion

HB 2023 is a small piece of legislation that reflects a much larger problem in the direction of public education in Oregon. For a state that falls far behind others in various measures of student attainment, one would expect a full-press effort focused on excellence and achievement. Instead, the legislature is again being diverted by partisan political agenda that will harm underprivileged students in the state most of all. No representative or senator of good conscience should support this bill.

About the OAS

The Oregon Association of Scholars (www.oregonscholars.org) is the Oregon chapter of the National Association of Scholars (www.nas.org), a nationwide research and advocacy coalition of scholars and citizens united by a commitment to academic freedom, disinterested scholarship, and excellence in American education. OAS members include active and emeriti professors from colleges and universities concerned with protecting the institutions of a free society.

⁹ Bill Bigelow, *A People’s History for the Classroom*, Zinn Education Project, n.d.

¹⁰ *Rethinking Ethnic Studies* Edited By R. Tolteka Cuauhtin, Miguel Zavala, Christine Sleeter, Wayne Au

¹¹ The seminal critique is by Dr. Sandra Stotsky, Professor Emerita in the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, “The Negative Influence of Education Schools on the K-12 Curriculum,” *Academic Questions*, June 30, 2008.

¹² Testimony of Jessica Ventura, Legislative Director, Oregon Department of Education. House Committee On Education 3/11/2019 3:00 PM, HR D

¹³ GLSEN, *Evaluation of GLSEN’s Safe Space Kit* (2015),

https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/safe_space_efficiency_10-6-15_WEB.pdf

Related OAS Publications

The Oregon Association of Scholars is active in advocating for academic freedom and research excellence in Oregon. Recent public policy publications include:

- “Oppose the Trivialization and Misuse of the Holocaust in Oregon Public Schools” (Statement Opposing SB 664,2019), [Link](#), *Bend Bulletin* [op-ed](#).
- “The Government of China’s Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in Oregon” (Issue Brief, 2018), [Link](#)
- Rebuilding Individual Freedom and Political Pluralism in Higher Education in Oregon, OAS Policy Memo, June 2018. [Link](#)
- Oregon’s Accessible Private Colleges and Universities Are the Best Value (OAS Report, 2017), [Link](#)
- “New state law imposing ‘cultural competency’ training on professors will drive up tuition, undermine educational goals, stifle debate.” (OAS Statement, 2017), [Link](#)
- “Grade Inflation Harming Oregon College Students” (OAS Report, 2017), [Link](#)
- *The Imposition of Diversity Statements on Faculty Hiring and , Promotion at Oregon Universities* (OAS Report, 2017), [Link](#)