

8 March 2021

With urgency, we submit this testimony in support of SB 683 of the 2021 Regular Session of the Oregon State Legislature, known as the Anti-Racist Curriculum Act. This measure concretizes essential learnings for the youth and future generations of Oregonians. Through comprehensive and deliberate instruction on racism and antiracism, we convey the magnitude of historical and present-day injustices. By teaching the structures, stories, and mechanisms of anti-Black racism, we impel the next generation of leaders toward the reparation of injustice, the affirmation of human rights, and the recovery of suppressed human capacity.

As high school Humanities educators, we bear an important responsibility to equip our students with (1) an accurate, cohesive understanding of society and history, and (2) a critical lens through which to perceive and interpret the civic society in which they will soon participate. Therefore, even without the passage of SB 683, we have already committed to teaching our students about the history of violence, dispossession, and disenfranchisement in the United States and beyond -- as well as the empowered movements for human rights and justice that resisted such powers. One might ask, then, *Can't we rely on teachers to fulfill the mission of SB 683 without a legislative mandate?* To this concern, we respond:

- First, teachers already teaching this content and vision will benefit from increased support, curriculum, and attention from ODE and the State as proposed in SB 683.
- Second, teachers resistant to a requirement of antiracist curriculum either underestimate the influence of anti-Black racism, which touches every corner of United States society; or, they see the mandate as politicized and therefore illegitimate, which fails to acknowledge that racism is harmful to our society in transcendence of party lines because it suppresses human creativity, innovation, and capacity.

Therefore, SB 683 is not a matter of “forcing” curriculum on teachers, but an effort to assert the necessity of such curriculum and to advocate for a broader, more resourced support structure.

An additional consideration for this measure, particularly considering the trauma wrought by the pandemic and its rippling impacts, is how SB 683 may impact student mental health. Many members of our community have expressed qualms about young people having to wrestle with grisly history or catastrophic hopelessness: for example, isn't it damaging for a second grader to learn about slavery? To this concern, which we share, we provide three responses.

- First, it's more damaging to risk the very real possibility that swaths of young people are learning inaccurate histories or none at all when it comes to anti-Black racism.
- Second, the measure begins to account for the issue with the Advisory group denoted in Section 3. This group will have some important work to do: identifying and/or synthesizing curriculum that demonstrates the scale and scope of anti-Black racism in Oregon and the United States, as well as the history and future of projects in antiracism in Oregon and the United States. Beyond this, we must trust the Advisory group to apply expertise in developmental differentiation of curriculum and pedagogy: the group members of Section 3, Item 2(a), will determine the age appropriateness of each topic.
- Third, we recommend that the Advisory group should take special concern to avoid the retraumatization of Black students whose encounters with racist history may be deeply disturbing. The Advisory group and ODE must develop best practices for maintaining the safety and wellbeing of Black students while simultaneously addressing the social forces that work against them.
- Fourth, we are obliged to equip our students with the capacity to draw hope from a hopeless situation, to find joy or love when it's easiest to see only sadness. We show the students the beauty and happiness to be found in the world, we build relationships with them to ensure their emotional wellbeing, but we also teach them how to persist — and even draw inspiration — when dealing with difficult realities. This is all to say that it's actually beneficial to students' long-term mental health capacity to learn how to reckon with the painful truths of American history and society.

Finally, the biggest elephant in the room to address: *Where's the funding?* In our careers, we have witnessed numerous unfunded policy changes, both on the state and national levels. Such policies are met with resistance and frustration by educators,

administrators, and community members; even if their intent is legitimate or admirable, their impacts may include undue financial strain on schools, especially the ones which are already underfunded. However, this is not reason in and of itself to dismiss SB 683, particularly insofar as the underfunding of education is inextricably bound up in the precise racist structures SB 683 confronts. In response, we call on the legislature to pass SB 683 *with dedicated financial support allocated*.

Thank you for your earnest consideration of our perspectives in this matter: as high school Humanities educators, we endorse SB 683 for the 2021 session of the Oregon State Legislature.

Best,

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