

March 8, 2021

To: Education Committee, Oregon Senate
From: Susan Stitham, Ashland, Oregon
Re: Testimony on SB 683 for March 10, 2021

Thank you for this opportunity to share my views about the admirable goal of this proposed legislation and the very serious flaws in its current language which will, in my opinion, consign any curriculum which might result from it to failure.

My background: I taught high school English and history in Fairbanks, Alaska for 34 years, during which I was a department head, and served on multiple local and state curricular and policy committees. I was co-chair of the task force which wrote the Alaska standards ("What Students Should Know and Be Able To Do") for Language Arts in 1991. I was a board member for the first six years of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (1987-83) as we created National Board Certification for teachers, and I received a Milken National Educator Award in 1992. I served eight years on the University of Alaska Board of Regents (1987-1995), and another eight years on the Alaska State Board of Education (1995 - 2002, the last three years as chair.

My premises: I strongly believe that the public school curriculum, at all grades in an age-appropriate manner, must prioritize teaching the tools for effective citizenship in a democracy. Critical thinking skills are an essential component of the foundation for citizenship and must be applied to a new history of our country which is broadened to include everyone's voices and based on an honest and factual account of the systemic racism that has been present from the beginning. To that end, I applaud the intentions of the proponents of this bill.

Unfortunately, however, I find SB 683 to be fatally flawed, as follows:

Major Problems with SB 683 as currently written:

1. It limits its focus to racism against Blacks (2.2% of Oregon's current population) although Oregon (and our country) has a long history of discrimination against other minority groups: First Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos, currently 1.8%, 4.9% and 12% of Oregon's population respectively. I do not believe it is either acceptable or accurate to assert, as proponents of this bill have done, that "once learned, anti-racism skills can be applied to discrimination against any minority group or person, not just Black people."
2. It does not require the participation of practicing classroom K-12 educators in the development of the proposed standards nor does it provide for any professional development for the teachers expected to implement those standards. As written, any product would just be another top down, unfunded mandate, developed by well-meaning outsiders, which will end up on a shelf, making no difference in the lives of Oregon students.

Recommendations:

1. The proponents of this bill should concentrate their efforts on enhancing the student standards being created under HB2845/Ethnic Studies which passed the Legislature in 2017. This curriculum mandate has the advantage of being inclusive and of involving practicing classroom teachers in the development of age-appropriate standards.
2. Inservice for teachers: my research to date did not indicate whether the Ethnic Studies Standards project has the funding to develop and provide substantive professional development for the teachers who are expected to deliver this new instructional content. If this is not the current plan, such a program certainly should be funded as soon as possible.
3. In my experience, stand-alone courses are not nearly as effective in changing the educational context for students as expanding and refining the course content in current requirements; to that end, a required course in US History, mandated by many if not most Oregon school districts, should be a primary focus for revision to include the many voices left out of the white “master narrative” as well as accurate accounts of systemic racism in Oregon and US history.