

May 16, 2023

Dear Members of the Alabama Senate,

The American Historical Association registers strong opposition to SB 247. Officially, this bill would prohibit discriminatory teaching and divisive concepts. In effect, however, the proposed legislation would make it virtually impossible for history educators to help students thoughtfully consider the continuing impacts of slavery and racism in American history. In spite of rhetorical efforts to obscure this purpose, the bill contains an explicit violation of a bedrock tenet of academic freedom. Any attempt to enforce this law would jeopardize the accreditation of Alabama's colleges and universities, potentially causing all students to lose access to federal financial aid dollars. This is an unnecessary outcome the state can ill afford.

Section (2)i of SB 247 prohibits public schools, colleges, and universities from teaching anything "contrary to the fact that, with respect to American values, slavery and racism are deviations from, betrayals of, and failures to live up to the founding principles of the United States, which include liberty and equality." The bill would therefore prohibit teachers from asking students to consider a diverse set of primary sources and wrestle with one of the central academic issues in historical scholarship for more than 50 years: the historical relationship between slavery and freedom.

This prohibition violates a central tenet of good history education; we help students learn how to think, rather than tell them what to think.

The founding generation wrestled with the political and moral issues related to the issue of slavery. Why shouldn't our students? The Civil War was fought over the issue of whether our Constitution permitted states to secede from the union in order to protect the institution of slavery. Americans in that era also disagreed over whether the Bible condemned slavery or provided a religious and moral basis for what some defenders of slavery referred to as our "peculiar institution." Our students can only benefit from reading the sources and wrestling with questions about the continuing (and changing) relationship between that "peculiar institution" and the ideas embedded in not only the founding documents, but also other expressions of the political and moral values central to American culture.

Teachers have plenty of well-established resources to help students understand the complexities and significance of these issues, which have drawn the attention of professional historians for at least two generations. This legislation reduces nuanced scholarship grounded in evidence to a list of conclusions that the state government finds acceptable; to do so betrays the very freedoms that the legislation purports to defend. This provision is a radical revisionist mandate based on ideological fearmongering, rather than engagement with sound principles of scholarship. Under SB 247, a high school teacher or college professor risks being fired for asking students to hone their independent, critical-thinking skills by weighing in on an important question.

Though this legislation might appear to respond to public concerns about history education, it does nothing of the kind. In reality, there is overwhelming and bipartisan public support for what the vast majority of history educators actually teach on this subject: that slavery and racism have played a key role in shaping American history, and that their influence redounds to the present day. According to a 2021 national [survey](#) conducted

by the AHA and Fairleigh Dickinson University, **three-quarters of both Republicans and Democrats support teaching history about the harm some have done to others even if it causes students discomfort**—exactly what history educators, with only rare exceptions, do in the classroom. Effective history teachers engage students in challenging explorations of the past to foster understanding and learning. The past is filled with decisions, relationships, and events that can easily make us feel uncomfortable about our predecessors.

With more than 11,000 members, the AHA is the largest membership association of professional historians in the world, representing every historical era and geographical area. Founded in 1884 and incorporated by Congress in 1889 for the promotion of historical studies, the Association provides leadership for the discipline, helps to sustain and enhance the work of historians, and promotes the critical role of historical thinking in public life. *Everything* has a history.

What is really at stake with this policy is the quality of history education itself. If passed, this bill would result in ignorance of basic facts about American history and undermine the education of Alabama’s students, including their ability to perform effectively in advanced coursework, whether in high school or college.

This bears emphasis: **The legislation you are considering would do significant harm to students in your state.** The important gaps in the knowledge of high school students would limit their college preparedness and their access to early college credit. The problems for college students would be not only ignorance, but possible financial hardship, as accreditation processes would try to ensure quality education that SB 247 makes impossible.

It would also harm their employment prospects. As the AHA has documented through our extensive work on career preparedness in history classrooms, the aspect of history education employers value most is students’ ability to communicate with and understand people from different backgrounds. This policy would limit students’ exposure to complex and contested voices from the past, making them less competitive job candidates and imperiling their future career prospects.

The AHA urges you to reject these misguided, harmful, and unnecessary restrictions on history education. I attach a [statement](#) criticizing similar legislative efforts to restrict education about racism in American history, co-authored by the AHA in June 2021 and signed by 155 organizations, including seven college accreditation agencies.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James Grossman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

James Grossman
Executive Director