January 5, 2022

Dear School District Leaders,

The American Historical Association is pleased to learn that the Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified School District “will not tolerate racism and racist conduct” in its classrooms and that it “stands by the commitment to teach a complete and accurate account of history.” Further, the district notes that “nothing in this resolution shall be construed to restrict academic freedom or student speech.” These are admirable sentiments and we commend the district for articulating them, and insisting that these values inform the teaching of American history in its classrooms.

That said, if the district is committed to academic freedom, why has it singled out one set of ideas—critical race theory—as a subject that cannot be taught in Placentia-Yorba Linda schools?

Critical race theory is usually not taught in K–12 classrooms. Why explicitly mention this theoretical construct and not others, since there is a nearly infinite universe of theoretical approaches that are currently not taught in the district but might be objectionable to different people for different reasons?

There is much to be concerned about when it comes to the teaching of American history. The AHA is well aware of the longstanding influence of history textbooks and curricula that distort the causes of the Civil War; portray Confederate leaders as heroes rather than men who committed treason on behalf of the right to own, buy, and sell, other humans; distort the history of Reconstruction; and neglect the role of racism in the evolution of American institutions. Professional historians can identify long lists of things that have been taught in classrooms across the country that remained part of the curriculum long after being discredited by scholars. Why not expressly forbid the teaching of these historical inaccuracies? Why single out “critical race theory”? Is there any evidence that critical race theory has, in fact, been part of the curriculum in the Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified School District?

The school board wants to make sure that the district is “not imposing the responsibility of historical transgressions in the past.” The AHA hopes that this does not mean that history teachers will be required to minimize those transgressions themselves or their influence on the evolution of American institutions. To do so would be a direct and clear violation of “the commitment to teach a complete and accurate account of history.”

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 152 organizations, including seven college accreditation agencies.

Sincerely,

James R. Grossman
Executive Director