

December 21, 2021

To Members of the Oklahoma House and Senate,

The American Historical Association (AHA) strongly opposes House Bill 2988 introduced for the 2022 session of the Oklahoma legislature. Formally, the legislation prohibits “the use of the 1619 Project in certain institutions” and threatens to withhold state funding from secondary and higher education entities that teach “certain concepts pertaining to America and slavery.” The practical effect of this policy would discourage instructors from teaching students that

- the US Constitution prohibited Congress from abolishing US participation in the international slave trade for two decades;
- the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision legalized racial segregation;
- the overwhelming majority of slave holders in the US identified as white; and
- slavery was abolished three decades later in the United States than in most of the British Empire.

These are basic, straightforward facts that contradict stated premises in the legislation. Moreover, the vagueness of “certain concepts” will generate uncertainty and confusion among teachers and administrators alike.

This irresponsible legislation is an example of blatant censorship and will have a chilling effect on teachers. It is harmful to the youth of Oklahoma, leaving students ignorant of basic facts of American history and poorly prepared for the critical thinking and interpretive skills required for career and civic accomplishment.

With 11,800 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.

There is little doubt that critical race theory and the *New York Times*’ “1619 Project” are controversial. Historians can and do disagree with one another as they sift through the evidence. But it is not the purview of the legislature to monitor what qualified scholars assign to their students, except as part of a bona fide review and assessment process.

Although 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, winding through four centuries and into contemporary life. According

to a recent national survey conducted by the AHA and a highly regarded polling center at Fairleigh Dickinson University, three-quarters of both Republicans and Democrats support teaching history about harm done to others even if it causes students discomfort. This legislation prohibits precisely what most Americans want for their children—an education that will enable the next generation to draw on an honest reckoning with our past in shaping their future.

What is really at stake here is the quality of students' preparation across the state of Oklahoma. If implemented, this legislation would hinder high school students' ability to gain the knowledge required to pass the Advanced Placement United States History exam, successfully complete standard college-level courses in US history, or in some cases fulfill degree requirements for associate and baccalaureate degrees.

This bears emphasis: **The legislation you are considering would do significant harm to students in your state.**

The American Historical Association 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 152 organizations, including seven college accreditation agencies.

These organizations, in turn, stand on the shoulders of the nation's founders. Let us take inspiration from Thomas Jefferson, whose life embodied many of the tensions and contradictions that confront us now, and assert: "We are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it."

Sincerely,



Jacqueline Jones

President



James Grossman

Executive Director