February 27, 2024

Dear Florida Legislators:

HB 1291/SB 1372 threatens the integrity of K–12 history education in Florida, imposing troubling restrictions on teacher training programs that run counter to principles at the very core of historical thinking. The AHA urges you to reject this heavy-handed and inappropriate intervention in college curricula, classroom instruction, and professional learning.

The AHA agrees with the bill’s premise that history education should “not distort significant historical events.” And we heartily endorse its call to guarantee future educators “the opportunity to think critically, achieve mastery of academic program content, learn instructional strategies, and demonstrate competence.” These principles are central to teaching history with integrity.

Despite its rhetorical invocation to these principles, however, this legislation in fact tilts in precisely the opposite direction. HB 1291/SB 1372 would require educators teach a history that is incomplete, tendentious, and politically driven rather than based on evidence and consistent with professional standards, especially in its prohibition on content “based on theories that systemic racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege are inherent in the institutions of the United States and were created to maintain social, political, and economic inequities.” How can one teach about slavery, disfranchisement, and legally mandated racial segregation without reference to systemic racism? To do so would be to “distort significant historical events.” Would SB 1372 make it illegal to discuss Florida’s 1865 Constitution, given that it excluded all but white men from serving in the legislature? How is it possible to help students understand the importance of the 19th Amendment if they are prohibited from discussing systemic barriers to women’s political participation prior to 1919?

These questions are neither rhetorical nor unwarranted given the historically ill-informed language of this bill. The text in its current form raises troubling obstacles to honest and effective history instruction that accords with widely accepted professional norms in our discipline.

We are also deeply concerned about the unstated enforcement mechanism established by this legislation. Who decides whether “significant historical events” have been distorted, and will they be qualified to overrule the professional judgment of individual faculty? How far will the state extend its reach into university classrooms? As historians reading the primary sources relating to the origins and evolution of this legislation, and aware of its political context, we suspect that the law’s enforcement will allow contemporary politics to overrule evidence-based historical analysis. The victims of this partisan overreach will include both the educators who graduate from Florida’s public universities and the students these instructors will eventually teach.

SB 1372 establishes a mechanism for censoring classroom teaching and learning, and hence stands in stark opposition to academic freedom and true intellectual diversity. 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. Limiting the knowledge and intellectual horizons of Florida’s teachers in the ways proposed in this legislation would cause lasting harm to the future career prospects of young Floridians.

With more than 11,000 members, the AHA is the largest membership association of professional historians in the world. Founded in 1884 and chartered 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 imperative of historical thinking in public life.

Everything has a history, and the AHA encourages educators at all levels to “Teach History with Integrity.” We ask Florida legislators to join us in this effort and reject SB 1372.

Sincerely,

James Grossman
Executive Director