

Joint Statement on Legislative Efforts to Restrict Education about Racism in American History (June 2021)

We, the undersigned associations and organizations, state our firm opposition to a spate of legislative proposals being introduced across the country that target academic lessons, presentations, and discussions of racism and related issues in American history in schools, colleges and universities. These efforts have taken varied shape in at least 20 states; but often the legislation aims to prohibit or impede the teaching and education of students concerning what are termed “divisive concepts.” These divisive concepts as defined in numerous bills are a litany of vague and indefinite buzzwords and phrases including, for example, “that any individual should feel or be made to feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological or emotional distress on account of that individual’s race or sex.” These legislative efforts are deeply troubling for numerous reasons.

First, these bills risk infringing on the right of faculty to teach and of students to learn. The clear goal of these efforts is to suppress teaching and learning about the role of racism in the history of the United States. Purportedly, any examination of racism in this country’s classrooms might cause some students “discomfort” because it is an uncomfortable and complicated subject. But the ideal of informed citizenship necessitates an educated public. Educators must provide an accurate view of the past in order to better prepare students for community participation and robust civic engagement. Suppressing or watering down discussion of “divisive concepts” in educational institutions deprives students of opportunities to discuss and foster solutions to social division and injustice. Legislation cannot erase “concepts” or history; it can, however, diminish educators’ ability to help students address facts in an honest and open environment capable of nourishing intellectual exploration. Educators owe students a clear-eyed, nuanced, and frank delivery of history, so that they can learn, grow, and confront the issues of the day, not hew to some state-ordered ideology.

Second, these legislative efforts seek to substitute political mandates for the considered judgment of professional educators, hindering students’ ability to learn and engage in critical thinking across differences and disagreements. These regulations constitute an inappropriate attempt to transfer responsibility for the evaluation of a curriculum and subject matter from educators to elected officials. The purpose of education is to serve the common good by promoting open inquiry and advancing human knowledge. Politicians in a democratic society should not manipulate public school curricula to advance partisan or ideological aims. In higher education, under principles of academic freedom that have been widely endorsed, professors are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject. Educators, not politicians, should make decisions about teaching and learning.

Knowledge of the past exists to serve the needs of the living. In the current context, this includes an honest reckoning with all aspects of that past. Americans of all ages deserve nothing less than a free and open exchange about history and the forces that shape our world today, an exchange that should take place inside the classroom as well as in the public realm generally. To ban the tools that enable those discussions is to deprive us all of the tools necessary for citizenship in the twenty-first century. A white-washed view of history cannot change what happened in the past. A free and open society depends on the unrestricted pursuit and dissemination of knowledge.

Signed,

American Association of University Professors
American Historical Association
Association of American Colleges & Universities
PEN America

The following organizations have co-signed this statement:

ACPA-College Student Educators International
Agricultural History Society
Alcohol and Drugs History Society
American Anthropological Association
American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
American Council of Learned Societies
American Educational Research Association
American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO
American Folklore Society
American Library Association
American Philosophical Association
American Political Science Association
American Society for Environmental History
American Society for Theatre Research
American Sociological Association
American Studies Association
Anti-Defamation League
Association for Ancient Historians
Association for Asian American Studies
Association for Documentary Editing
Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies
Association for the Study of Higher Education
Association for Theatre in Higher Education
Association of College and Research Libraries
Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges
Association of Research Libraries
Association of University Presses
Association of Writers & Writing Programs
Business History Conference
Center for Research Libraries
Central European History Society
Chinese Historians in the United States
Coalition of Urban & Metropolitan Universities (CUMU)
College Art Association
Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender History
Comparative and International Education Society
Conference on Asian History
Conference on Faith and History
Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes

Czechoslovak Studies Association
Forum on Early-Modern Empires and Global Interactions
Freedom to Read Foundation
French Colonial Historical Society
German Studies Association
Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities
Historical Society of Twentieth Century China
Immigration Ethnic History Society
John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education
Labor and Working-Class History Association
Middle East Studies Association
Modern Language Association
NAFSA: Association of International Educators
National Association for College Admission Counseling
National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education
National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education
National Coalition for History
National Council for the Social Studies
National Council of Teachers of English
National Council on Public History
National Women's Studies Association
Organization of American Historians
Phi Beta Kappa Society
Radical History Review
Rhetoric Society of America
Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media
Shakespeare Association of America
Society for Austrian and Habsburg History
Society for Classical Studies
Society for Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era
Society for the Study of Early Modern Women and Gender
Society of Architectural Historians
Society of Civil War Historians
Southern Historical Association
Urban History Association
Western History Association
World History Association