

James Bhandary-Alexander  
72 Alden Avenue  
New Haven, CT 06515  
[Jbhandary-alexander@nhlegal.org](mailto:Jbhandary-alexander@nhlegal.org)

March 5, 2019

Dear Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

My name is James Bhandary-Alexander. I am a resident of New Haven, a legal aid lawyer, and the proud parent of three daughters in New Haven public schools. I am here to testify in favor of HB 7082, which would require schools to provide instruction in African-American Studies.

I was born in 1975 to highly educated parents. My mother was a librarian and my father a professor of ancient history at a state university. We moved around quite a bit because of my parents' jobs, from rural downstate Illinois to North Carolina and eventually to Oak Park, a prosperous, leafy, liberal suburb of Chicago. We moved to Oak Park because it was on the subway, was perceived to have good schools, was integrated, and had many affordable apartment buildings, one of which we lived in.

The high school I attended, Oak Park River Forest High School, was rather huge: I had 1,000 people in my graduating class. This high school racially integrated, with a significant African-American population and a small Latino population. However, it was still majority-white, and during the years I was there, the school was by most accounts "racially tense." These were years in which white parents and students began to react very defensively to the activities and organizations of black students. For example, the school had a black student-parent organization, which mainly functioned to support student academic pursuits, called the Black Organization for Student Support, or B.O.S.S. The group had a t-shirt with the slogan "It's a black thing, you wouldn't understand." Many white students silently resented this message – and perhaps perceived it to be part of a change in the culture that white students really could not understand or relate to – Spike Lee's "Do the Right Thing," the revival of popularity among African-American students in African cultural practices and fashion, the place of Malcolm X specifically alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. in popular music and film, and the "Rodney King incident." Most of the students – both white and black – had a lot of family in Chicago itself, statistically the most segregated city in the United States. Although Oak Park defined its attitude towards what it called "race relations" in opposition to Chicago, there were more similarities than differences.

It was in this context, during my years at this high school, that African-American students lobbied for and won both an African-American and African history course, which students could take as an elective in their junior or senior years. I took both. At the time, despite the educational background of my parents, I was wholly ignorant of black history and culture. More specifically, I had not read black writers. I had not read histories written by black historians, had not read novels by black authors, had not read poetry by black poets, and had not read music criticism by black critics. It may not sound nice, but I was ignorant.

Some people hold tight to their ignorance on many subjects. It is often easier to be ignorant in a socially acceptable way than be challenged, informed, and articulate. That was true when I was in high school, too. In response to the formation of the Black Organization for Student Support, which fought for and won these classes, some white students formed something called the White Organization for Student Support. They were a little precursor to the alt-right of today, motivating a sense of white racial grievance and loss. They did not want these classes to exist and would not take them. In retrospect, I think the school should have simply made these classes a requirement, which is what I take this bill to

do. Let us open up the minds of Connecticut's children to the diversity, complexity, resilience, and excellence of African-American history and culture.

Sincerely,

James Bhandary-Alexander