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March 5, 2019

Letter of Support for H.B. 7082—Teaching Black History

Dear Sen. McCrory, Rep. Sanchez, Ranking Members, Vice-Chairs, and distinguished members of the Joint Education Committee:

I am writing in support of H.B. 7082, *An Act Concerning the Inclusion of African-American Studies in the Public School Curriculum of Connecticut*.

I have researched and studied the 250 years of American slavery both in Colonial New England (particularly Connecticut), as well as in the South. I have also studied and written about the experience of African Americans who coped with 90 years of “Jim Crow” after the Civil War, and 60 years of “Separate but Equal” that only a full-fledged Civil Rights Movement ended. Racism, however, continues today in other forms that must be challenged. Most people I encounter in my work have no idea of this nation’s racial history and if they know *something*, they have compartmentalized and separated it from today’s reality. Never the twain shall meet.

The damage from our nation’s “original sin” will never be repaired, nor our injuries healed, until we tell the truth about ourselves, starting with our educational curriculums. As the journalist Ta-Nahesi Coates [wrote in the Atlantic Magazine](#), “Until we reckon with our compounding moral debts, America will never be whole.” The past and the present should be joined.

Each year since 1976, our nation has devoted the month of February to “recollections” and “celebrations” about Black History. We watch movies about Civil Rights heroes, we listen to Dr. Henry Louis Gates tell us about slavery in America, and we privately worry as we learn about all the new ways Jim Crow continues in the form of mass incarceration, racial profiling, voter suppression, hate marches and even clear nods to white supremacy from our own President.

As a white person growing up in the ‘50s and ‘60s, and receiving a good education at all levels, I was inadequately taught about our nation’s real history of slavery, the white supremacist view that undergirded it, nor about Jim Crow laws, segregation, the violence and terror that accompanied it, and certainly not about the damage all of it inflicted on generations of African American slave descendants. I believe that our “collective” history, for the most part, has been shaped and written through a lens of European and American accomplishments, a grossly distorted portrait of past and present truth.

Four million slaves emerged at the end of the Civil War; today 40 million live with its aftermath, engulfed—like the universe—in an all-pervasive background radiation that is invisible and never goes away. The real history of African Americans, which has barely emerged in the US, should be told, starting in the educational system. To tell it whole is to embark on a path of liberation.

1. Controlling the historical narrative is to learn the truth of how history actually unfolded, which can be an empowering effort and an historic motivator. This is my first reason for supporting a true Black History curriculum in the public schools. All of us have been subjected to a

version of history that is simply *incomplete*. We need to correct that deficiency in our educational experience. As the Economist, Algernon Austin wrote:

We cannot pretend that America's history as a slave society bears no relation and has no consequence for the America that they live in today. We cannot carve the history of racial oppression out of the history of America...Only when we accept and own this history will it be clear to us what needs to be done to move the country forward.

2. My second reason to support this bill is that it can benefit those of us who are white and need the education, as much as it can benefit those who are African American and deserve a full and complete history. I have often cringed at the phrase “Black History”—because it suggests that “history” happened in a vacuum and had nothing to do with, or was separate from, “White History.” The truth is that African Americans survived white Europeans only by great suffering, and with courage, persistence and determination. Their history is our history because we were its terrible agents. Economically and politically powerful white Europeans made decisions and took actions that created the suffering, the need for courage and the will to endure. White systems, policies, and practices drove (and still drive) racist and white supremacist ideas. And it is white people who need to fully learn this (our) history, in order to recognize the ugly strains of supremacy that arise among us today.

3. Third, we need Black History taught in the schools to help create a new awareness that decisions made and actions taken years before shape reality today, and that understanding these will help heal us and lessen the urge towards supremacist thinking. We need to learn how past reality happened, and what we can do to change it continuing in the future. Education can help with this. The lack of awareness affects both black and white citizens alike today. As the Vice President of Demos, Connie Razza, has written:

Without our explicitly describing the forces, decisions, and people stripping freedom, access, and wealth from Black people, the story is incomplete. We need to tell the whole story, not only to repair the policies and practices that drive racism and not only to improve our analysis of where we sit in history. It turns out that we need to tell the whole story in order to heal ourselves and the generations that will follow us.

4. My final reason for supporting this education bill is that I believe it will provide hope to the young people it may touch. When we abandon the ahistorical approach and elevate the true history of the Black experience in America, and the many courageous movements to address its dark aspects, we can reveal strategies and tactics that have relevance and inspiration for contemporary society. Recognizing past struggles for justice, we can draw hope that the future can be different, and that understanding lessons from history will influence what we do today.

Thank you for considering my letter of support for this important bill. I urge the Education Committee to enact it, send it out for passage on the floor, and work to build a worthy curriculum for the public schools.

Sincerely,

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