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Reference: House Bill 7082

I am writing this letter on behalf of the West Hartford African American Social & Cultural Organization (WHAASCO) to endorse House Bill 7082.

West Hartford has an outstanding school system with which WHAASCO is engaged to improve the curriculum as it relates to Black History. West Hartford Public Schools have a well intended effort to include African American history in the curriculum. However, the history appears to lack context. As a result, the feedback from many African American students is that they feel embarrassed during the lessons.

Often when public schools address Black History, they focus on slavery and civil rights, without a broader perspective. This approach reinforces a message that black people are inferior. This appears to be a legacy of the intentional miseducation of blacks to support previous systems of slavery and subjugation. For example, it is known that black slaves were not taught to read because it might empower them to resist their circumstance of slavery. In many cases, it was illegal to teach a slave to read. Less known is that the story of Moses and the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt was excluded from religious teachings to slaves due to concerns that slaves may identify with the Jewish resistance, or with the Egyptian people of color. In more modern education, history has been modified to minimize or exclude the contributions of blacks. Simple examples include the exclusion of the abolitionist roots of the Statue of Liberty and excluding the contributions of blacks to the inventions of the light bulb and the design plans for Washington D.C.

To address this concern, I propose we set a context for a curriculum for African American history. That is, it is important to note that people originate in Africa, the first tools were used in Africa 2.5 million years ago. The oldest civilizations were black and brown communities in the Middle East (referred to as the Near East in European history) and Africa. These civilizations - Mesopotamia, the Ottoman Empire, the Egyptian Empire, the Ethiopian Empire, and the Nubian Empire preceded the Roman Empire by hundreds and thousands of years. From them came language, written communication, art, architecture, libraries, universities, philosophy, mathematics and algebra, domestication of animals, and many of the foundations of civilization.

It is important to preface the lessons on slavery and civil rights, which recounts the subjugation of blacks, with the history that empires and civilizations of black and brown people began well over 2000 years before the Roman Empire was established and these civilizations flourished ahead of, and on par with, other civilizations until European Imperialization that began in the 1500's AD. That is, civilizations of black and brown people played leading roles in the science, math, architecture, philosophy, agriculture, and many intellectual endeavors of civilization for over 3500 years before systemic subjugation of black and brown people began in the late 1500's. It is important to put into perspective that the last 500 years of black history is a fraction of the many thousands of years of black history that has led the way for civilization and human progress.

Without an updated curriculum for Black History, our students will continue to accept, without question, the subjugated status of Black and Brown people, which stifles the contributions of our citizens and full potential of our society.

Thanks for your consideration.

Earl Exum  
Past president and current member, WHAASCO