

**Testimony on House Bill 7082 "An Act Concerning the Inclusion of African-American Studies in the Public School Curriculum."**

Education Committee

March 1st, 2019

Respectfully Submitted by: Lauren P Gorham, Job Coach, New London High School, New London, CT

Dear Esteemed members of the Education Committee,

My name is Lauren Gorham. I have worked for the New London Public Schools system for 25 years, first as an English as a Second Language teacher at New London Adult Education; and for the last 13 years, as a job coach serving special needs students in a vocational program through New London High School.

Growing up a middleclass white girl, in suburban school districts throughout the country (my Dad was in the Navy), I learned history, math, science, and English along with all the other students. But something important was left out. I learned about slavery and the Civil War and Civil Rights, but something was left out. I learned that black people were victims, they were poor, they were sometimes angry, and they were sometimes criminal. But something important was left out. What was left out was the perspective of African Americans and the **numerous equal contributions of African Americans** who built America right alongside their white (often oppressive) brothers.

My flawed education hurt me because it led me to unconsciously see a whole group of people as "less than" because they just weren't represented anywhere in the curriculum. If that education hurt me, a middleclass white girl, I cannot imagine the effect it has had on African American and brown students.

We have been leaving out a huge swath of the truth of America and it must end.

You may know that the New London Public Schools student body is  $\frac{3}{4}$  Black and Hispanic. Thirteen years ago, when I began working at the high school, the disengagement of the students was obvious. From the trash found in the hallways and stairwells to the level of non-attention in the classroom, it was clear to me that something was wrong.

While lack of student engagement in urban schools has many causes, the curriculum cannot be left out as one of them. Black and brown students did not see themselves represented in the staff, in the school policy, or in the curriculum. Much work on the part of the human resources department has led to a more diverse staff and the administration has made efforts to acknowledge our diverse student body. There is improvement and today I see no trash in the stairwells.

But we have a long way to go. A 2017 survey of high schoolers found that only a third knew that the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution ended slavery and only 8% understood that slavery was the primary reason for the South seceding from the Union. This knowledge gap hurts our democracy. I believe that mandating African American studies be taught in every school is essential for the mental health of our black and brown children and equally essential to the health of our democracy. I urge you to support House Bill 7082.

Sincerely,

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