

Dear Members of the Education Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly:

My name is Philip Kalikman, and I am a PhD Candidate in Economics at Yale University. I am also an advisor to Students for Educational Justice (SEJ). I support House Bill 7082, with SEJ's amendments. This bill is important to me because the history of race and racism in America, and in particular the contributions of Black Americans and African-Americans to America's economic prowess, are not adequately taught anywhere in the educational system, particularly given the incredible magnitude of those contributions and their essential role in America's present prosperity.

I am a white, Jewish American who grew up in San Francisco, a progressive city with a population consisting of approximately half people of color when I grew up there. I attended schools that were progressive even by San Francisco standards. Nonetheless, I learned virtually nothing about the history of race and racism in the United States. I learned that slavery was a brief aberration in American history, an innocent mistake made by well-intentioned people who "did not know better." I learned that discrimination stopped after the passage of the Thirteenth through Fifteenth Amendments. I understood that Black Americans were far more likely than white Americans to live in poverty, to be imprisoned, to use government benefits, and so on--and clearly, since the nation was no longer discriminatory, this must have reflected either their intrinsic inferiority or their poor choices or cultural values. Nothing else could have made sense in light of what I had learned in school.

Of course, everything I learned was wrong. Slavery was not an aberration, but the fundamental economic institution upon which this nation was built. Discrimination did not end with the Civil War, but continued throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, in particular with the significant economic discrimination and disenfranchisement throughout the first two thirds of the 20th, and continues to this day. And the economic impact of stolen labor and wealth, the lack of an opportunity to accumulate wealth, and the continued institutional and interpersonal racism of the country fully account for Black Americans' economic outcomes today. That I came to understand this is a small miracle, in light of the unified and pervasive forces with a vested interest in my not doing so. This knowledge is a threat to the system. What is our democracy if it is not actually fair? What is my own sense of entitlement to my economic privilege, if I and my ancestors (I am a fourth-generation citizen) did not really earn it, but are instead beneficiaries of a system that eventually decided that we Jews were also white and therefore entitled to the privileges of Whiteness in that system? I owe a debt of gratitude to patient public intellectuals, such as Ta-Nehisi Coates, who painstakingly explained the surface of this untaught history to me in landmark pieces such as *The Case For Reparations*, and to my enlightened friends and peers who, instead of cutting off communication with me when I maintained my stubborn insistence on the myth of meritocracy and denied their personal accounts of racist treatment as unrepresentative or due to misunderstandings, patiently educated me and pointed me in the direction of ways I could educate myself further.

It is for these reasons that I got involved with SEJ, and that I fully and strongly support SEJ's amendments to House Bill 7082. White Americans like me make up the majority of our society, and end up holding an even greater proportion of positions of power within it. Our decisions

affect all Americans. But we do not learn the truth we would need to make those decisions accurately and fairly. We need a school system that teaches all Americans the truth about the economic origins of our country and the crucial role Black Americans and African-Americans played in those origins and have played since. And we need students and teachers who have their minds open to listen to the experiences of their peers. Black students and other students of color in my schools spoke to me about their experiences, but their statements challenged my worldview and I did not want to hear them. It was easy for me to dismiss their statements because there was no institutional voice or structure validating their generous efforts to educate me. We never spoke, in the classroom, about racism or what race meant. No teacher or educator ever taught me about race as a construct. Without such training, of course I didn't know how to engage with peers who presented a worldview that was so fundamentally different from, and to some degree threatening to, my own. Of course, lacking the same experiences, many of my teachers were just as dismissive of students' experiences. How many made racially insensitive remarks, stereotyped their students, and thereby alienated them and impaired their ability to learn in the classroom? More than I like to recall. I was privileged to have the only consequence of my upbringing in a society that protected a myth of white superiority be my own ignorance. But my peer students of color had to contend not only with that lie but also with the demoralizing consequences of attempting to learn, and to be judged for their progress learning, in a system that both insulted and oppressed them and then denied that very oppression.

As written, House Bill 7082 would be an important first step in addressing the problems I have described. But we could do so much more. African-American history is essential and, given our nation's foundation on the institution of slavery, distinct from the history of other peoples of color. It must be taught. But we must not simply nod to that distinctiveness without properly contextualizing how that history has interacted with the white-empowering creation of race as a concept and with the persistence of institutional and interpersonal racism in our society. Teaching a history of race and racism will ensure that the distinct history of Black Americans is taught with appropriate regard for its impact and place in American society past and present, while also enabling students to learn the broader connections between the experiences of other peoples of color in American society and the particular experiences of Black Americans. Requiring anti-racism / anti-bias trainings for teachers will ensure that students are able to learn, and in particular to study these complicated and sensitive topics, in a fair and productive environment. And given the depth of topics currently absent from the curriculum, it will take a dedicated committee within the Department of Education to ensure that these topics are taught with the depth and consideration they deserve, not just that teachers pay lip service to them with a nod to the contributions of a few historical leaders.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Philip Kalikman