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BLACK AND PUERTO RICAN CAUCUS

**MEMBER**  
EDUCATION COMMITTEE  
HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE

Good afternoon Chairmen Sanchez and McCrory and distinguished members of the Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on H.B. 7082 AN ACT CONCERNING THE INCLUSION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL CURRICULUM.

No one has played a greater role in helping all Americans know the black past than Carter G. Woodson, the individual who created Negro History Week in Washington, D.C., in February 1926. Woodson was the second black American to receive a PhD in history from Harvard—following W.E.B. Du Bois by a few years. To Woodson, the black experience was too important simply to be left to a small group of academics. Woodson believed that his role was to use black history and culture as a weapon in the struggle for racial uplift. For decades now, the material covered during the month of February has been treated as a sidebar to the American history typically taught in U.S. schools. Posters of respectable black figures hang in hallways and classrooms. Students read historical facts over the intercom during morning announcements, and teachers often have them read essays about a courageous civil rights activist in class. There is a sort of novelty—these important, intricate milestones and moments that shaped the United States are divided into bite-size pieces, presented over 28 days.

Perhaps there would be no need to observe black history in a designated month if it were taught year-round, alongside other histories as part of a regular curriculum. It would not be such a novelty if there were a rigorous effort to view it as a central part of the American story.

But we aren't there yet. And, until we get there, Black History Month should be recognized as a crucial opportunity to broaden students' knowledge and help them see how the past connects with their lives today—and how it has inspired movements for change.

Feminists, LGBTQ advocates and leaders of the Chicano movement have all been inspired by the human rights campaigns of people of African descent, from rebellions to boycotts.

### **Valuing Black Lives**

Nearly 100 years after historian and author Carter G. Woodson created Negro History Week, Americans still do not have a complete understanding of the black experience and its influence on all of our lives.

“Those who have no record of what their forebears have accomplished lose the inspiration which comes from the teaching of biography and history,” Woodson wrote. However, that teaching often falls short.

Black history is American history, and if educators are not equipped with the tools to teach these lessons—or they only prop up the feel-good parts of history—then they do a disservice to all students.

And we know that educators don’t have all they need to teach black history right. There is a lack of comprehensive instruction, even within the two most commonly covered topics: slavery and the civil rights movement.

### **Where We're Falling Short**

Most students leave high school without knowing much about the enslavement of Africans in British North America and what became the United States, in part because textbooks, standards and curricula often fail to provide in-depth coverage. In 2017, Teaching Tolerance reported that only 8 percent of high school seniors could identify slavery as a central cause of the Civil War.

That lack of deep coverage is evident in textbooks. For example, Texas textbook publishers have been criticized for downplaying the role of slavery in the Civil War. That state’s board of education recently added slavery as the main cause of the war although they still opted to include “contributing factors,” such as states’ rights. The urge to dilute language when referring to hard history can also mislead students. In 2015, for example, a McGraw-Hill social studies textbook notoriously referred to enslaved Africans as “workers.” It is an introduction to erasure—not seeing the value in a people who, such language implies, were given a choice.

Meanwhile, younger students learn about key figures, such as Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, before they are introduced to the reasons these figures had to fight for freedom and equality in the first place. The context for their fight—American slavery—isn’t usually taught until later, around fourth or fifth grade.

This pattern holds true in our teaching of the civil rights movement, as well. As we reported in 2011 and 2014, states fail to set high expectations for learning. What students often get instead is a condensed version of factoids, a February full of “holidays and heroes,” when they can explore sanitized experiences of black people without any context.

The overall narrative goes something like this: America overcame slavery, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. helped usher in new civil rights laws, and then we elected the first black president. This story gives a false sense of progress, or “post-racialism.” And it has real-life effects: When students are unable to connect the past to the present, it’s harder for them to recognize or fight against the oppressive systems that harm black people to this day.

When Woodson established Negro History Week in 1926, aligning it with the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, he knew that this recognition was more than just a time for touting achievements.

He understood that people are more likely to devalue those who are invisible or omitted from history. Woodson hoped that if educators highlighted African Americans’ humanity—their intellect, resilience, creativity and dignity—they could inspire black people to embrace their blackness and reject internalized racism. And they could encourage the rest of the world to embrace that humanity as well.

“If a race has no history, if it has no worthwhile tradition,” he wrote, “it becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world, and it stands in danger of being exterminated.”

It’s important to note that Black History Month shouldn’t be only about detailing traumatic experiences. While enslavement and the fight for basic human rights molded our society, it’s only a small part of this country’s saga. Black history doesn’t begin or end with slavery. Africans have always built civilizations and enjoyed diverse cultures of their own. However, since the continent is rarely explored in classrooms, African lives and experiences—and as a result, their influence on the world—is virtually erased.

### **Teaching Black History As American History**

When learning about the passage of civil rights laws and other victories, students might grapple with the notion of equality versus the reality that our nation is far from equitable. Schools and neighborhoods continue to be segregated, and African Americans still fare worse than their white counterparts regarding wealth, health and rates of incarceration.

Studying black history helps students understand how failure to acknowledge past truths reinforces the status quo—a clinging to structures rooted in oppression.

They’ll learn that policy changes alone won’t amount to true equality. Policies haven’t ended institutional and systemic racism. And they never will until all lives are truly valued.

How can we stop history from repeating itself when we choose not to include half of that history in our school’s curriculum? When we hear about student’s wearing blackface and not understanding the tactless history behind this, we fail as educators. We as parents, educators, teachers and legislators have the responsibility to teach our students about truth and in our roles, we are responsible for encouraging discourse and reshaping curriculum to one that includes all parts of history, not just the history that is written out in textbooks. People should have the opportunity to learn this history, if we do not history will be subject to repeat itself.

Throughout my childhood, I could have benefitted learning things like the regions African-Americans were enslaved from in African countries, the culture, the languages and why slaves were brought to the United States. The current Public School curriculum condenses this history and things are left out. Having African-American studies included in our school's curriculum would empower students, and remind them that all history needs to be heard. With just one month to learn about Black History, students do not have the opportunity to learn about a broader scope of facts.

We know parts of the history of some of our most celebrated leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, but do our students know the legacy of Henrietta Lacks, an African American woman whose cells have contributed to the research and findings of zero gravity in outer space? Do our students know who Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman elected to the United States Congress, is?

I urge you to support this legislation to include African-American Studies in the Public School Curriculum.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brandon L. McGee Jr." The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial 'B'.

Brandon L. McGee, Jr.  
State Representative  
5<sup>th</sup> Assembly District