

Education Committee Public Hearing
Wednesday, March 6th, 2019
Dalena Nguyen

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

Good afternoon committee members, and thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Dalena Nguyen, **and I am an AP World History teacher at Achievement First Hartford High School.** I've taught history for 9 years. starting my career in Mississippi, teaching World History and African American Studies. If there were ever a more complex context to teach African American studies, it would probably be found in the Mississippi Delta. Imagine the juxtaposition – trying to teach a nuanced history of the African American experience in the united states while 10 miles down the road, fields of cotton were prepping for harvest. Unfortunately, Mississippi did not have a state curriculum for African American studies. The Magnolia State and I did my students a disservice that year because I, as a first-year teacher, had to hobble together a curriculum based on an outdated edition of African American History. If I had had a curriculum that was well funded and crafted with the purpose of broadening the African American experience beyond that of slavery and the civil rights movement, I would have had a hand in helping my students understand their own stories – a story not built on just a foundation of oppression.

I stand before you today in support of the inclusion of African American Studies into our public school curriculum. I stand before you today surprised and disappointed that there isn't already an African American studies course in our curriculum. if there were ever a time when our schools need to become more inclusive and diverse, it is now. It is in the context of today. This inclusion is called for by not just k-12 educators and voices in ivory towers, but of local communities and public opinion. Just last week PBS news released an op-ed pushing to teach African American history beyond slavery and black history month. Glen Mourning, born in Danbury, Connecticut and educational contributor to PBS news and CNN's "Black in America II" confronts the difficult and damaging reality of framing the history of an entire group of people with extreme violent conditions and unimaginable oppression. He states that "teaching our students from this narrow point of view may have drastically harmed the psyche of multiple generations of African American children and families[.] What damage have we done to the spirit of students of color in the united states by emphasizing that "their people" were the property of slave owners, forced to work on plantations, denied all of the inalienable rights that are characterized in the very constitution that governs this land that they call home?" According to Mourning, the current curriculum is responsible for this damage – it is our duty and responsibility to begin the healing process. We can start with the inclusion of African American studies in our curriculum.

For far too long the history of peoples of color has been taught through a white, Euro-centric, male-dominated lens. How did slaves gain their freedom globally in the 1800s? Well, it was through the actions of a European Enlightenment of course. It was through the Emancipation Proclamation of a white president. It is only in the last few decades that academia reframed this narrative. This is due to the expansion of educational opportunities for people of color; to their inclusion in crafting a much more enriching, inclusive, and complex narrative. In my classroom, we don't just learn about the European, demand-side economics of the Atlantic Slave trade. We investigate the autonomy and agency that West African kingdoms maintained in the Slave trade. It's not the prettiest history, but it certainly gives students a much more nuanced view of the past. Students learn a narrative that gives them more agency – a narrative not steeped solely in oppression. Imagine if students of color could have that every day in the classroom? That's what historical healing could feel like. That can start with the inclusion of an African American Studies curriculum framed around a narrative of African American agency and empowerment.

That is why I strongly support HB-7082.

Thank you.