March 6th, 2019

By Marquis Johnson, M.A.

H.B. 7082: AN ACT CONCERNING THE INCLUSION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL CURRICULUM.

Senator Douglas McCrory, Representative Robert Sanchez, Representative Brandon L. McGee Jr. and distinguished members of the Education Committee:

By way of introduction, my name is Marquis Johnson and I am an educator. I am here to support HB 7082: AN ACT CONCERNING THE INCLUSION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL CURRICULUM.

At the center of every decision in education, we must become most concerned with the *WHY* of what we teach and how we teach it. Who do we want our students to become? What skills do we want them to have? We teach them science to become scientifically literate and have the ability to draw logical conclusions based on empirical data. We teach mathematics because it is the language of logic. What then is the purpose of teaching history from an exclusive Eurocentric perspective? Any great historian will tell you that every voice from a historical account is important and allows us to understand a much more complete story. The only way to truly understand history and social studies is through multiple perspectives. If America’s narrative belongs to all of us, it is inappropriate to only allow one group to tell everyone’s story. Therefore, it is imperative that African-American studies be included in the social studies component of the public school curriculum.
I appreciate this committee’s consideration of House Bill 7082 as a taxpayer, educator, and African American alumnus of Windsor Public Schools. As a science educator who is teaching in a middle school that I once attended as a student, my life has come full circle. I never thought I would be a teacher because I couldn’t see myself in the curriculum. Being one of the few African-American Honor students in my classes, I often felt like my voice was not important because the subject matter never included me. If I left it up to my social studies textbooks over the years, I would have had the impression that African-American contributions were limited to slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. This exclusion, which once deterred me from being an educator, became a motivator. I have seen hundreds of students be positively impacted by a diverse academic experience.

In my 8th-grade science class, I focus on teaching students to be curious about the world and ask questions that will deepen their understanding. At the beginning of this school year, I asked my students to draw their perception of a scientist and 90% of my students drew older white men with glasses and untamed hair. What is unsettling about this is that 60% of my students are from minority groups while 40% are Caucasian. I asked my students to consider why most of them drew this image. Almost all of them expressed that this was the predominating image of a scientist that they learned about throughout their educational career. In February I asked my students why there is a Black History Month. Many of them said it was because black people did not and could not contribute much to this country because they were just slaves. Yet again, they expressed that their reason for thinking this was due to the perspective of history that they had been exposed to. This perspective, according to students, has been overwhelmingly Eurocentric. As one Caucasian student put it, “I feel like we haven’t been taught enough about African Americans. I feel like I’m missing a big part of my history.” Another student expressed,
“In every textbook, we’ve ever had, there is only like one chapter about black people. That chapter is always about slavery, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King. I have always felt like there had to be more.”

As written, the current framework for the K-12 Social Studies curriculum attempts to help students see themselves within their community and within the world. It focuses on inquiry being the approach by which students interact with content. As stated in Dimension 4 of the framework, we expect students to take informed action as a result of this exploration. In order for them to achieve this, they must have a well-rounded educational experience that explores all perspectives and grants them a holistic historical context with which to examine past and present events.

Every cultural experience throughout the world contributes to the fabric of our history. These experiences are almost never independent of one another. Any great historian knows that only studying one perspective distorts, narrows, limits, and keeps us from deepening our understanding of the world. We are unable to see the whole picture. Currently, American history and social studies are only being taught from one perspective; one that only takes into account the stories, experiences, feelings, and achievements concerning those of European descent. This version of history has gaps. We have a responsibility to our students to give them a full picture of the world and how it has come to be.

African novelist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie states that “Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to
tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.” We must always think of information as power and be reflective of how we use that power. Many would argue that history allows us to be critical of humankind’s mistakes so that we do not keep repeating those same mistakes. This is the power of knowledge. W.E.B. Du Bois asserted on many occasions that education should challenge power systems, not replicate them. He wrote, “Either America will destroy ignorance or ignorance will destroy the United States.” It is with this understanding that we acknowledge how African American Studies can heal the wounds of America, while equally deepening them if neglected.

One of this country’s leading African American Studies professors, Dr. Kush K. Bhardwaj tells us that, “African American studies has the ability to be descriptive, corrective, and prescriptive.” This means it can allow our students to be able to describe what has and is happening to individuals who are part of the African diaspora all over the world. Moreover, it teaches them to understand and empathize with these experiences. These studies help students correct the image of African Americans that have been learned through distortions, misrepresentations, and omissions. Lastly, students are given the opportunity to consider how they can right the wrongs of society and create a more perfect world. This should be WHY we teach students Social Studies and history.

I believe that we have the power to make history today. The decision to include African American studies will be a major step in the direction to deepen our children’s understanding of history and who they are. This Bill is necessary to make sure that all of our children have access to information about their past while informing their future actions and decisions. Make no mistake, African American history is the history of all children from all backgrounds. Let us show
our children that the African American experience is important so that all children can see themselves in social studies, as well as others, by mandating that it be included within the curriculum.