

May 19, 2021

To Members of the Texas Senate and Lt. Governor Dan Patrick,

The American Historical Association registers strong objection to Texas House Bill 3979, an act relating to the social studies curriculum in public schools. This bill represents gross government overreach into the curricular matters of K–12 public schools. Its apparent purposes are to intimidate teachers and stifle independent inquiry and critical thought among students. The act also seeks to maintain high school classrooms as spaces “safe” and isolated from major themes in the nation’s history and from knowledge generally accepted by history professionals.

If enacted, this legislation is likely to prohibit professional teachers from including in their courses standard content required in Advanced Placement and dual-enrollment American history courses offered at the high school level. Such an outcome would lead to two unanticipated consequences. First, a course might lose its AP accreditation, or at the very least make it impossible for Texas students to perform well on AP exams without independent supplementary preparation. Second, the dual-enrollment program enabling high school students to receive college credit for qualified work would be jeopardized, as the law would prohibit the inclusion of topics (not *perspectives*) required in nearly all college classes. A college history course presents students with the kinds of difficult, controversial questions prohibited by this bill.

The uncertainty of how SB2020/HB3979 will be implemented and the likely loss of offerings for dual-enrollment and AP History courses could hurt Texas’s progress toward increasing its college-educated population. Last year 12 percent of all college students in Texas were dual-enrollment students. History is the most offered course in dual enrollment.

A second set of unanticipated consequences derives from limitations on the participation of historically significant organizations in internship and service-learning programs, or in funding professional development for teachers, along with course materials. Such organizations, defined by “private funding,” lobbying, or “social or public policy advocacy” among other activities would exclude Chambers of Commerce, foundations, and most private corporations along with the “activists” that are no doubt the targets of those clauses.

These obvious implications should give immediate pause to any member of the state legislature familiar with the traditional vital role of community institutions in public education. Perhaps most ironically, the legislation requires assignment of “excerpts from Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*,” which famously extolls the civic role of the very same institutions being excluded from providing professional development or student internships.

None of this damage, of course, is the actual purpose of this legislation, much of which is couched in barely concealed euphemisms. This is about whitewashing American history, keeping to the margins (or

excluding altogether) such central issues as slavery; forced removals of Native Americans; inequalities based on race, gender, or other characteristics; and other aspects of our past likely to inspire the vigorous discussion that characterizes a good history class. If a teacher cannot cast “blame on the basis of race or sex,” how are students to understand who owned human property and who were enslaved? Or, the role of the “White Primary” in the disfranchisement of African Americans?

The American Historical Association, the largest and oldest association of professional historians in the United States, frequently reminds its members and the public at large that “everything has a history.” If this bill passes, teachers will think twice before helping students to understand why women were excluded from voting booths for a substantial period of American history, excluded from what the bill refers to as “the American experiment in self-government.”

The AHA also objects to the bill’s stipulation that “a teacher may not be compelled to discuss current events or widely debated and currently controversial issues of public policy or social affairs.” This clause would permit a teacher to reject a social studies coordinator’s mandate that a course include the history of conflict in the Middle East, trade with Asia, or political corruption. All of these topics—indeed virtually all subjects of current interest and debate—have a history that helps to illuminate how we got where we are today. To deny Texas students the opportunity to discuss these issues openly and freely is to deny them their rightful place as citizens of the United States, and of the world. We urge the Texas legislature to reject this misguided, harmful, and unnecessary piece of legislation.

Sincerely,



Jacqueline Jones
President



James R. Grossman
Executive Director