

January 24, 2022

Via Electronic Transmission

To the Honorable:

Jonathon Tate Reeves, Governor of Mississippi

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Representative Philip Gunn, Speaker of the House

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Representative Jason White, Speaker Pro Tempore

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Representative Robert Johnson III, House Minority Leader

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Representative Richard Bennett, House Education Committee Chairman

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Senator Angela Turner-Ford, Chairwoman of the Mississippi Legislative Black Caucus

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RE: Letter in Support of the Accurate and Honest Teaching of History

We, the undersigned persons, organizations and institutions, affirm our support for the full and honest teaching of history in the public schools of Mississippi. We stand in opposition to proposed legislative attempts to politicize the instruction of history in our public schools and Institutions of Higher Learning. The legislative bills – one of which has already passed the Senate – have obscure and broad-ranging language that makes enforcement of any legislation problematic and almost impossible. This legislation is an attempt to disrupt the public trust and intellectual space that is the classroom with polarizing ideological rhetoric, and it serves to misinform students, locking them out of the intellectual resources they need to address the social challenges the state has suffered for generations. Without the opportunity to wrestle with unsettling truths about race and racism in Mississippi's past and present, students will not be sufficiently prepared as adults to engage in the civic activity required to move the state past its history and ideological divides.

Similar legislation is already in law in Texas, Tennessee and Iowa, [among other states](#).¹ In those states, there have been instances where wide swaths of history and [lessons on anti-racism and diversity](#) are excluded from the curriculum.² For instance, in Virginia, the winning candidate in the 2021 governor's race had a promise in his campaign to ban books like Toni Morrison's "Beloved" from school reading lists.³ In Tennessee, a teacher was fired for, among other things, teaching about the prevalence of white privilege.⁴

¹ From (Gibbons, 2021) <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/07/02/why-are-states-banning-critical-race-theory/>

² From (Cineas, 2021) <https://www.vox.com/22644220/critical-race-theory-bans-antiracism-curriculum-in-schools>

³ From (Gibbons, 2021) <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/politics-policy/irony-ban-beloved-virginia-can-found-pages-book-rcna4081>

⁴ From (Natanson 2021) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/12/06/tennessee-teacher-fired-critical-race-theory/>

Attempts to limit ideas and teaching are not new in Mississippi. In 1956, the state Legislature mandated the teaching of Mississippi's history using textbooks by John K. Bettersworth, whose textbooks obscured the perspectives of African American Mississippians and muted the brutality that characterized slavery in the state. In 1974, Jim Loewen, a professor at Tougaloo College, along with Charles Sallis, a professor at Millsaps College, published a textbook intended for use in the required Mississippi Studies course entitled *Mississippi: Conflict and Change*. It was rejected by the State

Textbook Authorizer Board for teaching “[too much black history](#).”⁵ In 1980, a state court overturned the authorizer board's ruling and mandated that the book be placed on the approved list.

Honest history helps us reflect on who we are as a community and who we want to be moving forward. The history of Mississippi is a story of triumph and tragedy, especially when it comes to racism and race. If we want to move forward as Mississippians, we have to reckon accurately and intentionally with our racial history.

The passing of legislation that seeks to limit the free exchange of ideas in public classrooms hinders educators from honing the critical thinking skills and knowledge base of students. A democratic society demands an informed and prepared citizenry. Public schooling equips students with the intellectual and historical tools they need for robust civic engagement. Teachers and professors must have the academic freedom to explore vital events and concepts in our state's history to help students wrestle with some of the unsettling and discomfoting aspects of our history and contemporary society. For it is in this intellectual and social discomfoting that the lessons of history can better prepare our students for robust civic engagement as adults and strengthen our democracy. Mississippi has come a long way, but has a long way to go. Let us not circumvent real progress to satisfy political posturing. Mississippi's children deserve more.

Sincerely,

Vangela M. Wade

Vangela M. Wade
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Mississippi Center for Justice

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⁵ From (Italie, 2021) <https://apnews.com/article/entertainment-arts-and-entertainment-77ad500bdf0cfe0d20b61be8bb58844a>

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