



Testimony of Mark McCormick

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House Committee on K-12 Education Budget

Monday, January 24, 2022

Room 546-S, 3:30 p.m.

Committee Chairs and Members of the K-12 Education Budget Committee,

My name is Mark McCormick, and I am the Director of Strategic Communications at the ACLU of Kansas, a nonprofit and nonpartisan civil rights organization.

The invitation we received to present this afternoon included a message that Rep. Williams believed that something called “Critical Pedagogy” is being taught in Kansas schools and that she further believes that this pedagogy saddles white children with the sins of their ancestors.

In Journalism school, at the William Allen White School of Journalism, we were taught to check things out. Even if your mother says she loves you, said one of our most famous editing professors, “Check it out.”

So, that’s what I did.

I made a call to the state’s largest school district, USD 259 in Wichita, and asked if “Critical Pedagogy,” or “Critical Race Theory” were being taught.

I received a firm, “No.”

My colleague from the Shawnee Mission School District said “Critical Pedagogy” isn’t taught there, either.

Now, I realize that I was invited to this hearing to discuss “Critical Pedagogy,” but I must respectfully reject this framing. It seems to begin and end with a fundamental misunderstanding of our state and national history. It cynically suggests that all white people were on one side, and all Black people and other people of color were on the other. That’s not only untrue, but a dangerous and unfair rendering. I cannot, in good faith, entertain this assertion that masquerades as fact.

What I can do, is discuss the benefits of a more robust study of our history as a nation; what I can do is discuss what seem to serve as the underlying fears related to that more robust study of history; what I can do is try to put those fears to rest.

As the former Executive Director of The Kansas African American Museum and a national board member of the Association of African American Museums, I often confronted questions about whether it was even morally defensible to fund museums – given budget constraints nationally and in most states.

Our response was direct.

Studies have shown that visits to museums – an arm of public education – make students more tolerant; inspire students to grow and stretch and learn; make students more compassionate; make students better citizens; make them want to engage civically and to contribute to their communities.

These forays into our history give students critical thinking skills, cultural literacy; creativity, curiosity, knowledge and understanding.

Taylor Branch, the historian and author, said “history is the LANGUAGE of civics.” Essentially, that without a proper understanding of our history, we fall short in our duty as citizens.

In his work writing about the civil rights period, roughly from the Brown Decision of 1954 to Dr. King’s death in 1968, Branch said the freedom movement freed white citizens, as well as African Americans. It broke “the grand circle of fear” and helped close the emotional distance between Black Americans and White Americans.

Please don’t hurry past this idea.

Branch is saying that a more complete rendering of our collective history could liberate all of us. The only barrier is fear. An age-old fear.

As I wrote in an article last summer, the late historian John Henrik Clarke explained the dominant subculture’s preoccupation with manipulating history.

Europeans “began manipulating history in the 15th century to justify the slave trade,” said Clarke, a pioneer in Pan-African studies. Modern racism incubated during this period, Clarke said.

This later became a way of justifying Jim Crow and all that came with it, from voter suppression, housing and school segregation, and other forms of discrimination.

It became a way to maintain the status quo where people of color and women were squished into society’s margins, virtually out of sight, and out of mind.

But this segregated history is unfair not only to Black people, but to the heroic efforts of the white people who fought on the right side of history.

It is unfair to John Brown, who is featured in a dazzling mural in this stately building; It is unfair the William Allen White, the Emporia journalist who ran a third-party gubernatorial campaign to fight the insurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in state politics; It’s unfair to the Rev. James Reeb, the native Kansan killed in Selma, Ala. marching for African American voting rights. Today, there’s a monument to Reeb in Selma. We can ALL be proud of that.

Most of all, it is unfair to send white students the message that their only tie to the past is racial tyranny, when that simply wasn't the case. There were and are pitched battles over the soul of this nation, battles between our better angels and our ugliest impulses, as Journalist Jon Meacham has said.

We don't think the legislature should be censoring history.

We don't think these efforts at censorship prepare Kansas students for the most diverse America ever;

We favor honesty in education.

And to Rep. Williams concerns about white children "feeling bad" about this history, the only disappointed or embarrassed students would be the children cheering for the Confederacy; the children cheering for Jim Crow; The children cheering for the deputized mobs who bloodied the late John Lewis and who killed Rev. Reeb.

"Myths," said Journalist Jelani Cobb in a recent interview, "can powerfully shape our reality."

That's why I could not engage in the discussion about "Critical Pedagogy," because it feels like the same old myth-making and fearmongering that we need to dispose of.

Here's the truth: Race was an organizing principle in the formation of this nation. Any racial reckoning requires an understanding of this fundamental fact. From the "Three-fifths Compromise," to the U.S. Supreme Court's Dred Scott ruling that said enslaved people had "no rights the white man was bound to respect," to today.

We don't arrive at truth until suffering speaks, and our nation needs this process to begin.

That said, I'll leave you with remarks from the late historian John Hope Franklin, from a lecture he gave back in April of 1969:

"If there was slavery, injustice, and unspeakable barbarities, the selling of babies from their mothers, the breeding of slaves, and the lynchings, and the burnings at the stake, and discrimination and segregation – these things too are part of the history of the United States. If the patriots were more in love with slavery than freedom; if the founding fathers were more anxious to write slavery into the Constitution than they were to protect the rights of men; and if freedom was begrudgingly given and effectively denied for another century, these things too are a part of the nation's history.

It takes a person with a stout heart and great courage and uncompromising honesty to look the history of this country squarely in the face and tell it like it is. But nothing short of this will make it possible to have a reassessment of American history that will in turn permit the teaching of the history of Negro Americans.

And when that approach prevails, the history of the United States, and the history of the black man, can be written and can be taught by any person – white or black or otherwise.

For there is nothing so irrelevant in telling the truth as the color of a man's skin."

Thank you for your time.