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TESTIMONY: H. 3728

BEFORE K-12 SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE HOUSE EDUCATION AND PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE

January 24, 2023

I am Dr. Janelle Rivers, Education Advocacy Specialist for the League of Women Voters of South Carolina, and a retired South Carolina educator and administrator with grandchildren who attend South Carolina public schools.

I followed the curriculum restriction proposals that were introduced in the General Assembly last year. H.3728 is better in some respects than previous bills. Some provisions, such as allowing review of course materials and posting curriculum information, are excellent ideas that are already routine procedures for many of our districts. However, this bill contains some provisions that are potentially damaging to our public education system.

Our current media environment is replete with so-called news sources that intentionally distort the facts or promote outright falsehoods. This is not a new problem. Several years ago, I attended a series of school board meetings where crowds of fearful, misinformed parents and grandparents made outrageous false accusations about curriculum issues in reading and mathematics, two subject areas that are far less controversial than social studies. These people revealed by their public comments that they believed fear-mongering propaganda that had failed to inform them about the curriculum issues they claimed to oppose.

This bill creates unnecessary risks for social studies teachers. All of you know that South Carolina is facing a serious shortage of qualified applicants for teaching positions. There may be some teachers who need guidance, but threatening teachers and administrators with sanctions, beyond those that already exist through usual administrative procedures, will risk driving even more qualified people away from the teaching profession.

Social studies teachers are tasked with teaching some unfortunate truths about the history of the United States in ways that promote understanding, cooperation, and participation in the democratic processes that form the foundation of our government. Some of our shared history, especially in South Carolina, involves systematic exploitation of less fortunate members of society and intentional undereducation of certain populations. Those are uncomfortable facts, but they are indisputable truths.

The League of Women Voters supports the idea of requiring the Department of Education to create and make accessible model lesson plans for teaching the difficult topics of social studies

in all grades, but with the addition of a deadline that requires prompt implementation and without a simultaneous requirement for other subject areas. Asking the Department of Education to distribute model lesson plans in all grades and subject areas is an unnecessary provision that would dilute the focus of this bill and lengthen the time required for responding. The notion that topics of concern cannot even be included in any materials used for instruction is unrealistic and sets up a situation that minimizes opportunities to teach critical thinking. Instead, limit the focus to the specific areas of concern and require model lessons illustrating how teachers can safely and comprehensively teach relevant facts and help students learn to think about the problems that our society must solve.

Lawmakers must approach sanctions against teachers and school districts carefully. Codifying the best practices already used by school districts and the Department of Education for handling parent complaints is a sensible action. On the other hand, creating a process that encourages unfounded complaints against teachers and schools will undermine a public school system that is already in jeopardy.

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