

Senate Bill 683 Testimony

Chair Dembrow, Vice Chair Thomsen, and Members of the Committee,
For the record, my name is Aleesha Nur Kazi. I am a Legislative Assistant to Senator Wagner, but today I testify on my own behalf as a resident of the State of Oregon, as well as a graduate of our K-12 education system four years ago. I am the daughter of two Bangladeshi immigrants, and I was born and brought up in West Linn, Oregon, a predominantly white city. Throughout my childhood, I do not remember a single time when we were educated about local racism in our state and even my own city. Our education left us with the conclusions that Native Americans gave up the land we stand on today or died out, and that Black Americans just never came to Oregon. These beliefs were never part of the assigned curriculum, but rather lies created in our minds by the lack of context taught.

The lack of education about Oregon's racist past also took a toll on my own mind as I was growing up. Growing up in school, black and brown individuality, stories, contributions, and experiences were not actively validated, so being white seemed a standard for normalcy. I began to develop a sense of inferiority syndrome, something that I struggle to move beyond even today. I would try to hide the parts of my identity - my own culture and heritage, because of scrutiny from other students. Children would tease me if I wore henna on my hands, they would mock my mother's broken English. For many years I had even struggled with making friends since I was so different from my peers. Please consider what that does to a child. No child should have to be ashamed of the color of their skin, the language they speak at home, or who they fundamentally are. Where teaching history ties across the gap that's still missing after implementing ethnic studies education previously, is that it validates the legacy of BIPOC contributions and the struggle that people of color have endured in order for this state to exist. Teaching the history of racism also teaches students of color that their lived experiences are not unique to themselves and their families, nor because of the way they are. Children blame themselves for the discrimination that they face. If I could have understood what was happening to me was not my fault, perhaps I would have engaged more in my own culture. Perhaps I would have learned to write in my mother's tongue, and gained more value among my peers. I do believe that if this awareness and knowledge would've existed in my schools when I was growing up, my mind may have been different.

Furthermore, this is a key bill about respect. We as a state need to respect the sacrifices that people of color made in the past for this state to exist on, especially because their descendants live today with lasting consequences. West Linn High School is located right beside Willamette Falls on the Willamette River. While we took several walking trips across the Oregon City bridge, not once were we ever taught about the forced removal of the first people who lived right here, nor the cultural significance of the falls to the Clowewalla as a sacred place. We learned of the Cherokee Trail of Tears, but never about the many Trails of Tears endured on this soil. Teaching the legacy of racism in Oregon helps recontextualize current, local, and individual discrimination as part of the same systemic problem that needs solving. It's time we change this pattern of silence, and move forward into broader, comprehensive, and more honest education for all of our students. I thank you for your time, consideration and the opportunity to testify today. Please vote yes on Senate Bill 683.