

Written Testimony of Jeff Wihtol On SB 683  
The Anti-Racism Curriculum Act (“ARCA”)  
Before the Senate Education Committee  
March 10, 2021

Chair Dembrow, Vice Chair Thomsen, and Members of the Committee:

Events of the past several years make it clear racism is endemic and is not going away. The FBI tells us the number 1 domestic terror threat is white supremacy. Yet most racism is far less overt and blatant. We are all racist to varying degrees, often not even recognizing it. Color blindness and racial indifference enable racism.

Racism harms all of us, prevents people from realizing their full potentials, limits their contributions to our society, and inhibits us from realizing our aspiration of equal justice for all. SB 683 offers us our best hope for defeating racism through the promise of education.

SB 683 will begin the process of instructing our future leaders, first responders, educators, prosecutors, judges, and voters to recognize racist policies, ideas and acts, and then to formulate corresponding anti-racist policies, ideas, and acts. Once learned, those skills can be applied to discrimination against any social, ethnic, or racial group or individual. This begins the extirpation of racism.

Instruction under ARCA uses the history of racism against Black people for its foundation. Why limit it to Black people? There is a very long list of groups that have suffered discrimination in our state and country: Native indigenous peoples, Latinx, Muslims, Hindus, Chinese, Japanese, Pacific Islanders, Irish, Polish, Italians, Catholics, Jews, Mormons, persons with disabilities, LGBTQ+, and women, to name several.

But Black people are the only group enslaved en masse regionally for centuries, and who have been and continue to be relegated to America’s lowest caste by many. The obvious immorality of that history provides an excellent basis for teaching anti-racism skills, which will have lasting positive impacts for all groups and people discriminated against.

Some oppose instruction on our history of racism, for fear it will *create* racism, blame and division. Instruction under ARCA can and must be provided without blaming or shaming anyone, with recognition that popularly held concepts of morality and justice change as education occurs and societies evolve. “Canceling” our history of racism would only perpetuate it. Robust teacher and administrator support and professional development must be provided to ensure optimal success and avoid undesirable impacts.

Some opposition statements appear to misunderstand the grave threat racism continues to pose to us all, or even why the socioeconomic status of Black households is well beneath that of white households. Without knowing the history of racism, it can’t be understood, let alone repaired.

For example, how is a Black child to feel when it becomes apparent that Black households have much lower accumulated wealth than their white counterparts. Should she accept the racist myth that Black people are less intelligent and of worse character than white people, and that is why? She may just do that, to her long-term harm, unless she is taught that due to white only land grants, denial of GI Bill benefits to Black veterans, redlining, running freeways through Black communities, and judicial enforcement of racially restrictive covenants, Black families did not have equal access to home ownership, and the rising equity that goes along with it. A white girl may tend to believe the racist myth explains it all. And this harm occurs because we don't know our history of racism.

The history of racism against Black people has been whitewashed, ignored, swept under our national rug, misrepresented, and avoided for far too long. Denial rarely leads to positive change. Only by learning our history, and how we got here, can real progress in defeating racism occur. But we cannot fix what we do not know or recognize.

Other countries have recognized that confronting their pasts is essential to moving forward. We must do the same. Germany mandates Holocaust curriculum so ethnic supremacy and genocide won't happen again. South Africa mandates Truth and Reconciliation so Apartheid won't happen again and the wounds of racism can heal. And Rwanda mandates a four-part education and reconciliation program so the wounds of war can heal and ethnic genocide won't happen again. We can't learn and progress from what we do not know.

Instruction under SB 683 must be coordinated with that provided under the 2017 "Ethnic Studies" (HB 2845), and the 2019 "Inclusive Education" (HB 2023) Bills, which include instruction on the "histories, contributions, and perspectives" of individuals of African descent, so that the resilience, resistance, achievements, and successes of Black Americans, which are many and remarkable, result in holistic instruction on the rich and remarkable Black experience in our state and nation. Instruction under SB 683 must be provided in all classrooms across our state.

SB 683 does not duplicate instruction under the Ethnic Studies or Inclusive Education Bills, which do not mention or require history of racism learning, or anti-racism learning. To the extent standards developed under those Bills overlap with ARCA, they are not required by those Bills, and could be deleted with a change of administrations. ARCA will require those standards. Any work already done that overlaps with ARCA would not need to be repeated.

Input from many, many people has led to modifying the original SB 683 in key and positive respects. Changes include: Providing additional educator support and professional development; Coordinating instruction with existing mandates under the Ethnic Studies and Inclusive Education bills; Avoiding blame or shame with recognition that concepts of social and racial justice and morality change with education and the evolution of society; and, Replacing "curriculum" mandates with supplying "resources" for instruction which shall include the specific historical events identified in the Bill's Preamble.

Please support SB 683, "ARCA", and move it forward without delay. We must have the courage to confront our past in order to better our future. Thank you for your consideration.