

Testimony in support, HB 2697A
Senate Committee on Education
Monday May 3, 2021, 3:15 PM

Chair Dembrow, Vice-Chair Thomsen and Senators Gelser, Gorsek, and Robinson,

Within my role as a Commissioner with the Oregon Commission of Black Affairs to work towards economic, social, political and legal equity for Oregon's Black communities, I offer support for HB 2697, relating to school inclusivity prohibiting symbols of hate.

Schools are spaces where every child, regardless of their background, should feel safe and a deep sense of belonging. As I reflected on the language of this legislation, I thought about the power of, the pain that's possible, and the trauma that is inflicted when images, language, and lack of awareness around symbols of hate and bias are experienced by children.

I think about my own childhood, growing up in central NY, the son of a Black father and a Jewish mother, and remember what it meant to be "one of the only." The difficulties, if I even understood the meaning at the time, of speaking up and protecting myself or pushing against the power of institutions. The comments about being "too sensitive" or "that's not what it means" when it relates to symbols that have deep and painful histories, like the noose, Nazi imagery and ideology, or the confederate battle flag. The proximity to these images were endorsements to make light of, or to joke at the expense of our most vulnerable and susceptible children.

This legislation provides an opportunity for our state to acknowledge fully the role that schools play in helping us understand our collective histories, and examine the ways that language, symbols, ideology and policies change over time. It is our obligation as an Oregon community to ensure that every child learns the truth of history, the connection with harms that endure, and build our awareness and understanding in order to create safety and belonging for every Oregonian.

I know the experiences of racism so many of us as Black people have painfully endured in educational environments doesn't get erased by one measure, but creating a vision for our school environments where we are cultivating cultures of acceptance and analysis of our histories will result in greater participation, empowerment and self-worth for so many of our students. It is my great pleasure to support this legislation, and I urge you to vote yes.

Sincerely,



Ben Duncan, OCBA Commissioner

