

HOUSE BILL 1775: SEPARATING RHETORIC AND REALITY

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On May 7, 2021, the Oklahoma governor signed House Bill 1775, which included a detailed list of what teachers can't teach in an Oklahoma classroom regarding race and sex. Fortunately for educators and for school districts, the toxic rhetoric around the bill bore little resemblance to the actual bill language.

Coming just before the anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre, and during an important moment in the country's reckoning with racism and sexism, the rhetoric in support of the bill was hurtful, unnecessary, and betrayed either a lack of knowledge of or a refusal to acknowledge the lasting damage of structural discrimination. The copy-paste language in the bill wasn't a result of an issue in Oklahoma but rather mirrors legislation working its way through legislatures throughout the country.

Fortunately, the bill as signed needn't change any of the important and necessary instruction around racism and sexism already being delivered in Oklahoma schools. The bill states that it does "not prohibit the teaching of concepts that align to the Oklahoma Academic Standards." Thus, all topics listed in the standards are fair game and, in fact, still required to be taught (e.g., the Tulsa Race Massacre, the Civil Rights Movement, Women's Suffrage, the Equal Rights Amendment, etc.). Importantly, Oklahoma History standard 6.9 requires students to

Examine ongoing issues including immigration, employment, climate change, environmental pollution, globalization, population growth, race relations, women's issues, healthcare, civic engagement, education and the rapid development of technology (emphasis added).

(Oklahoma's U.S. History standards include a similar provision at USH.9.3.) This standard encourages broad and in-depth discussion of issues related to race and sex (although it is unfortunate that gender issues are not explicitly included in the language).

Further, the language of the bill does not seem to prohibit any discussions that are occurring with regularity in Oklahoma classrooms or other opportunities to tackle difficult current event topics.

Much of the rhetoric focused on "Critical Race Theory," which is a method of examining society from the perspective that racism is socially constructed and built into various systems and institutions (e.g., law, education, housing, etc.). However, the bill never mentions this theory. Rather, it indicates that school districts shall not "require or make part of a course the following concepts):

- One race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex,
- An individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously,
- An individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of his or her race or sex,
- Members of one race or sex cannot and should not attempt to treat others without respect to race or sex,
- An individual's moral character is necessarily determined by his or her race or sex,
- An individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex,
- Any individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex, or

- Meritocracy or traits such as hard work ethic are racist or sexist or were created by members of a particular race to oppress members of another race.

Most of these items can be dealt with broadly. Oklahoma school districts **are not** encouraging, nor would they accept, teachers basing course requirements or lesson plans on the premise that one race is inherently superior to or more moral than another, or that certain races should be discriminated against. In fact, the Civil Rights Movement (which is included in the state's academic standards) was a direct response to the horrific, discriminatory actions of the dominant white culture rooted in the belief that white people were a superior race. Further, school districts are not requiring or encouraging course requirements on the idea that racism is inherent in some people, as if part of their DNA. When racism is discussed, it is generally from the point of view that it is a taught and learned aspect of human behavior.

Also, it is highly unlikely that teachers are informing students that, because of their race or sex, they are responsible for historical racism, or trying to make them feel distress because of their race or sex. The point of teaching about historical (and current) forms of racism is to help students understand the mistakes of the past, consider how racism manifests itself today, and have informed conversations about how to progress. HB 1775 should not prevent a thoughtful discussion about learned or structural discrimination and how it affects particular groups in our country.

Further, rhetoric that the students will be convinced that "meritocracy" and "hard work ethic" are racist or sexist is misguided. Teachers generally ask students to examine not whether these are inherently discriminatory concepts, but whether the United States is a true meritocracy if certain groups lack the same opportunities as others. Thoughtful, in-depth, challenging conversations from this point of view are not prohibited by the statutory language and are appropriate for classroom discussion.

In summary, House Bill 1755's language does not prohibit the teaching of any concepts in the Oklahoma Academic Standards, nor does it prohibit challenging classroom discussions about racism and sexism in America. Educators and district leaders shouldn't get caught up in the rhetoric that surrounded the bill. Oklahoma school districts should continue teaching all topics in the Oklahoma Academic Standards and should feel empowered to have challenging conversations about critical topics, especially racism and sexism in America.

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