

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

July 21, 2023

The Honorable Manny Diaz, Jr.
Commissioner
Florida Department of Education
325 West Gaines Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0400

The Honorable Ben Gibson
Chairman
Florida Board of Education
325 West Gaines Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0400

Dear Commissioner Diaz and Chair Gibson:

We condemn to the highest degree the racist tropes found in Florida's new African American history standards for K-12 students and demand that you reverse your decision. On Wednesday, the Florida State Board of Education adopted new standards for African American history for K-12 students. Among them, that middle school students shall be taught slavery could have been beneficial for enslaved people. Your decision to rewrite history to ingrain white supremacy into the minds of children is a colossal step backward and an insult to Black people, descendants of slaves, and the intellect of the American people.

On July 19th, 2023, the Florida Board of Education approved a first-of-its-kind set of standards for the teaching of African American history for Florida students. These new standards and instructions are not the truth of American history but riddled with falsehoods that minimize the unique racial terror experienced by Black people in America throughout time.

The approved curriculum dictates that children are taught the resurrection of one of the greatest lies America has ever told itself, that slavery benefited the enslaved. As you tell it, curriculum must, "Examine the various duties and trades performed by slaves (e.g., agricultural work, painting, carpentry, tailoring, domestic service, blacksmithing, transportation)...Instruction includes how slaves developed skills which, in some instances, could be applied for their personal benefit."¹ This lie only serves to benefit those who excuse slavery to avoid accountability or hope to commit similar abuse.

The issue of slavery has been litigated by a Civil War that included the service of almost 200,000 Black people and former slaves who fought and nearly 40,000 who died to kill it.² Debating it is an insult and rhetorical trap. Countless pages have chronicled the commonplace terror, murder, sexual assault, and sadism used to sustain it. That American slavery benefited the enslaved is a lie so absurd that slave owners themselves were too self-conscious to attempt it until they began to feel the heat of abolitionism in the years before the Civil War.³ And it was the lie retold to sustain white supremacy through the Jim Crow years.

¹ "Florida's State Academic Standards, Social Studies - 2023." *Florida Department of Education*. Accessed: July 20, 2023. <https://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/20653/urlt/6-4.pdf>.

² Freeman, Elsie, Wynell Burroughs Schamel, and Jean West. "The Fight for Equal Rights: A Recruiting Poster for Black Soldiers in the Civil War." *Social Education*, February 1992. <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/blacks-civil-war>.

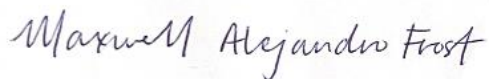
³ Bruce Levine, *The Fall of the House of Dixie* (New York: Random House, 2013) 31-32.

You instruct that this be told to every student in grades 6-8. These standards are out of touch with reality and will leave future generations of Floridians out of touch and disadvantaged in the world outside of Florida. Even worse, it plants the sinister thought that enslavement and continued harm toward Black people today is also acceptable and beneficial.

This is not the only dangerous falsehood in your standards. Your curriculum for African American history in grades 6-8 also requires downplaying and tempering the horror of American slavery by requiring it is coupled with teaching, “how slavery was utilized in Asian, European, and African cultures,” “the similarities and differences between serfdom and slavery,” and “comparative treatment of indentured servants of European and African extraction.” For grades 9-12, your standards list massacres of Black people in America as, “examples of acts of violence perpetrated against and by African Americans,” falsely assigning shared responsibility to Black victims. For example, your standards include the Ocoee Massacre, where just outside of Orlando, Florida, over the course of 48 hours in November of 1920, hundreds of white residents murdered dozens of their Black neighbors because those Black Floridians had attempted to exercise their right to vote.⁴ These false equivalencies have been used since the time of Jim Crow to minimize America’s sin.

We demand the Florida Board of Education immediately reverse its decision. Not repealing these new standards would dig up the corpse of the worst version of our nation and force our children to live in it.

Sincerely,



Maxwell Alejandro Frost
Member of Congress



Steven Horsford
Member of Congress
Chair, Congressional Black Caucus



Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick
Member of Congress



Frederica S. Wilson
Member of Congress

⁴ Stephens, Robert. “The Truth Laid Bare: Lessons from the Ocoee Massacre.” *Pegasus Magazine*, Fall 2022.
<https://www.ucf.edu/pegasus/the-truth-laid-bare/>.