

OPEN LETTER TO GOVERNOR STITT, OK STATE LEGISLATURE, AND OKLAHOMANS

The John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation (JHFCR) Board of Directors is deeply concerned about the passage of HB 1775. This bill allows teachers and school administrators to be penalized for teaching students about systematic racism. The John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation (JHFCR) promotes civil discourse through scholarly work. Considering we are just days away from the centennial of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre and the 12th Annual Reconciliation in America National Symposium, the passage of HB 1775 at this time or at any time is deeply troubling. Given that the value of our shared histories gives us the ability to overcome adversities, HB 1775 is a harkening back to the days of Oklahoma's segregation statutes, such as:

*Article 5, Title §70-5-4. **Teacher permitting child to attend school of other race.** – Any teacher in this State who shall willfully and knowingly allow any child of the colored race to attend the school maintained for the white race or allow any white child to attend the school maintained for the colored race shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and upon conviction thereof shall be fined in any sum not less than ten dollars (\$10.00) not more than fifty dollars (\$50.00), and his certificate shall be cancelled and he shall not have another issued to him for a term of one (1) year.*
[Laws 1949, p. 537, art. 5, §4]

HB 1775 reminds us of a dark past. A penalty for teaching students the truth of our historical past will once again prove the truth of not knowing history thereby repeating it, which creates a barrier to learning. Teaching the truth about history is the responsibility of a courageous educational system, and Oklahoma must rise to the occasion and engage in critical conversations around the history of racism in this country.

Oklahomans can and must harness the strengths of memory, heritage, arts and culture using the lessons of history. The passage of HB 1775 demonstrates that we are missing the opportunity to show how a system by which some people face inequality based on their race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality and/or immigrant status works against building trust and creating social harmony. All voices and all histories are needed at this time if American history is to tell the story of the United States adequately and fairly.

Dr. John Hope Franklin stated, "One might argue that the historian is the conscience of the nation, if honesty and consistency are factors that nurture the conscience." In 2009 at the groundbreaking of John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park, Dr. Franklin also stated, "I would like my students to take up where I left off and carry on the fight to establish history as a powerful force for good, a constructive force to rectify the ills of our society – to change the world, as it were." While we may not all have been students of Dr. Franklin, we must carry the conscience of this nation and be deliberate stewards of scholarship and truth.

We implore the Governor of Oklahoma and the Oklahoma State Legislature to not perpetuate systems of racism and bigotry but to join us in moving forward together.

John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation
Board of Directors