

Testimony of Dr. Aouicha Hilliard before the Virginia Board of Education - Feb 2, 2023

My name is Aouicha Hilliard. I am a retired professor of French and Francophone Literature and Culture. I have also regularly taught in our International Studies Program, and I'm a member of the Virginia Coalition for Human Rights.

I'm here to remind us of the lasting effect that teaching has on our students. We, as parents and teachers, have an enormous responsibility to prepare our children and students to become well-informed adults with accurate knowledge and the critical thinking skills necessary to navigate today's world. We do them a disservice when we present truncated information as history or social science and one-sided opinions as arguments. When our teaching excludes some voices, in effect dehumanizing others, we make the very notion of exclusion and dehumanization possible for all.

As I look at the proposed curriculum and see, as one example, the absence of references to today's Palestinians in the study of the modern Middle East, I know from teaching and advising college students for over forty years that we would be short-changing our younger student. Palestine is in the news; events there matter to us in the West and to the rest of the world. Yet students would be deprived of information about it.

I have seen first-hand that skewed information and an inability to reflect cogently leave students feeling embarrassed, confused and inadequate. Their difficulty with new ideas or points of view and their inescapable awareness of that difficulty hurt their sense of self. When we gloss over what some might consider unpleasant events or give pat, partial, or simplistic answers, we prevent our students from using their minds.

To help our students thrive as human beings and become productive citizens, confident in their ability to reason, regardless of their or others personal beliefs or politics, we must give them accurate, reasonably complete information and the analytical tools to grapple with it. Surely, our children deserve this much. I urge you to reinstate the August 2022 draft to collaborative standards and to reject the January 2023 draft.